

Gandhi Memorial College Of Education Bantalab Jammu

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The Garden of Solitude

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G.M. College of Education
Raipur, Bantalab
Jammu.

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*For the exile who said,
'All I dream of now is a garden of solitude,
where I get a morsel of rice in the
morning and a morsel of rice in the evening.'*

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Prologue



Poshkuj died laughing with a fishbone stuck in her throat. It was a dark night and the Pandits of Kashmir celebrated *Gada Bhata*, when rice and fish are offered to the Lord of the House. It was the winter of 1981. Poshkuj had slipped into an icy freeze with a mouthful of rice and fish. In between her meal, she had started sneezing and laughing vehemently. Her old snuffbox hid beneath her pillow.

Gowri, her daughter-in-law, had put rice and fish in a *thali* and placed the feast in the attic of their house for the Lord to come in the night, partake the delectable feast, protect the house and shower blessings.

Seeing a wide grin on his mother's face at the time of her death, Mahanandju, Poshkuj's only son, felt her pulse several times. He thought this was just another playful antic of hers to make the children laugh.

The grin on Poshkuj's face betrayed no clear answers amid the maddening din of the children, who crawled out

of the warm caves of their mothers' *pherans* to tickle her. The inebriated men in the family had spent the evening gambling with cowries. Gowri regretted that Poshkuj could not live to savour the feast for which she had waited an entire year. No one knew the answers to the riddles Poshkuj had asked before her death. The riddles remained unanswered.

Poshkuj was ninety at the time of her death. Her husband Michael Bawm, as he was called after his return from the foreign lands, had died eight years earlier. Poshkuj was cremated near the saffron field in Pampore, where she had spent her childhood. Her father had been a merchant of saffron and the sole owner of large saffron fields in Pampore. Her childhood was spent mostly playing in the saffron fields and at her home, where they stored saffron to be sold in other parts of the country.

After Poshkuj's death, Gowri took charge of the household. Knowing her mother-in-law's predilection for telling stories, she wanted to emulate her and keep the tradition alive in the family. She was fond of narrating one particular incident when Poshkuj had slapped a lion that had strayed from the forest into the orchard of her father's house in their village in Pampore. Gowri had likened the brave encounter between Poshkuj and the lion to some sort of a duel in which Poshkuj had emerged victorious, radiating a demeanour, almost goddess-like. Although there were no eyewitnesses to the slap, everyone in the family believed Gowri's account to the last detail. She told everyone that she was present in the house on that night and had woken up after hearing the roar of the lion and the sound of her mother-in-law's slap.

Every year, when everyone in the family got together to celebrate the festivals, Gowri narrated the story passionately. Everyone in the house would gather in the living room to

listen to the story of the slap received by the lion. The children listened with rapt attention, while the elders gaped at one another with astonishment.

Gowri was a great raconteur. She brought the images to life through the words she wove and the deft gesticulations she made:

'It was a cold winter night. Snow had covered the entire garden, and the water in the well resembled a frozen mirror. When Poshkuj stepped out of the house in the snowlit night to piss in the midst of the pear trees, a lion sauntered into our orchard. Just as she thought the lion would lunge at her, she mustered all her strength to face the beast. In a moment of supreme rage, she slapped the lion twice. Unable to come to terms with this humiliation, the poor beast fled into the bushes, never to return to the house ever after. Once the lion was out of sight, fear engulfed Poshkuj and she shouted at the top of her voice to summon her father and uncle. Later, she said that a lion should be called "Coal Thief". After slapping the lion, she had shouted, "Coal Thief, begone."

One story followed another, with twists and turns in each. The children ran their running noses on the ragged sleeves of their pherans. Men squatted in the corners, indifferent to the cowries in front of them. The suspense in the stories made them forget the stakes.

'Those days, Poshkuj and I walked from our village to our home in the city,' Gowri narrated. 'We never walked empty handed. We carried basketfuls of apples, pears and walnuts on our heads. If we were lucky, we would find a *tonga* in the city to take us home. It would take us a day to reach home.'

Gowri kept Poshkuj alive by narrating riveting anecdotes and stories about her.

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Poshkuj was never to know that years later her exploits would find mention in her great-grandson's book – *The Book of Ancestors*.



One



Mahanandju was a man of simplicity, discipline and virtue. His prized possessions were four shirts and two pants (sewn by Juma Saecz, his friend and the only tailor in his locality), a shaving kit – Made In England – gifted to him by his father, an ancestral mirror, and a wooden chest containing some personal belongings which no one in the family had ever seen. Cleaning them was a yearly ritual and no one was allowed in the room when he took out the treasure from the chest and laid them, one by one, on a clean sheet of cloth to dust them.

He had given up smoking the *hookah* some years ago, after a bout of persistent cough. The last day he smoked, he sat for hours by the window of his room, smoking his hookah and looking fondly at the lone willow in his courtyard. Later he asked Habib, the sweeper, to throw away his hookah. Habib lived in Zaina Kadal and had been working at Mahanandju's house for many years. He would come in the evenings to sweep the courtyard and clean the drains outside the house.

On certain days in the freezing winter, Mahanandju sat at Juma's shopfront, held the hookah pipe in his hand and imagined puffs. For years he had never missed listening to the evening news on his old radio. He always sat with his ear close to the radio so that he did not miss any word.

Mahanandju never visited the temple in the neighbourhood. No one ever recalled him talking about God or religion and observing the rituals important for the Pandits. A picture depicting Krishna as Arjuna's charioteer hung from the wall of his room. When alone, he lisped some hymns. Mahanandju was a man of great devotion and faith, but he never presented himself as a worshipper of idols. Once, in a fit of anger, he hurled an abuse at a priest and the idol of a Hindu god. His wife had entreated him to enter a temple and join the worshippers and devotees. He hated the almanac given to the family by the priest.

The Pandits and the Muslims of the locality held Mahanandju in high esteem. He was very influential with both the communities owing to his close friendship with the local Muslim leaders and the other Pandits. He was a well-known practitioner of traditional medicine and had cured many people of bone ailments by using a mixture of herbs acquired from various herbaria. The people he treated and the neighbours in the locality fondly called him 'Doctor Sahib.' He had learnt the art of curing bone diseases from his father Gulabju, an erudite man in his times. Gulabju had studied Sanskrit under an eminent Sanskrit scholar, who came from a family of scholars. They had taught the Vedas at the School of Vedic Philosophy near Bhejbehara. Gulabju had married Poshkuj when she was twelve years old. They had first met at a temple in Mattan, where their families had brought them to have a look at the fish in the spring. Poshkuj was on a visit to her uncle's place at Mattan. Gulabju's turban had

caught her attention and she was attracted to Gulabju. A year later, both were married to an exquisite rendering of *wanwun* by several women. The women from the village sang it even days later when Poshkuj returned with her husband to her father's place for a feast and when she left the village again, not to return that year. Poshkuj's coming and going from the village was always accompanied by *wanwun*.

Eight years after his marriage, Gulabju secretly disappeared from his house, and did not return home for eighteen years. When he returned, he established the Kashmir Vedic Society. His wife saw in him a changed man, a man whom she would have to get to know all over again. Upon his return, his beard had gone and he called himself 'Michael Bawm', a name which he said he had given himself during his travels outside Kashmir.

Gulabju was the first person in the family to have left Kashmir for foreign lands. Those eighteen years of his self-imposed exile were a mystery to everyone. No one knew where he had spent those years and how he had lived away from home for so long and for what purpose. But he had sent some letters home; letters to his son in which he wrote about his experiences and exploits. Mahanandju kept those letters with him.

It was only after many years that Sridar, Gulabju's great-grandson, unravelled and understood the real reason behind his great-grandfather's adventurous voyages in Europe. He read all the letters and came to know that his great-grandfather had left neither out of desperation nor to find freedom elsewhere.



Sridar was fourteen when a stray brown dog chased him from the street to his house. He shouted and yelled as he ran

breathlessly, 'Mother! Mother! Save me from the dog! The beast will bite me.'

He ran fast and slammed the door behind him. His grandfather, Mahanandju, caught hold of a broom and scared the dog away. Sridar stopped walking in the street on which the dog ruled. The dog did not stop terrorising Sridar and barked at him even from a distance.

Sridar's fear of the dog remained etched in Mahanandju's memory for a long time. Years later, the fading memory of a dog bite haunted Mahanandju in a series of recurrent dreams.

'Begone you wretched monster!' Mahanandju shouted at the dog, every time they crossed the street.

In his boyhood, Sridar feared three things – the dog in the street, India losing to Pakistan in a cricket match, and circumcision performed on the Muslim boys of the locality.

He could never bear the sight inside the room at Noor Medical Hall, where Dr Noorjan and his assistant lined up boys on two wooden benches. Dr Noorjan held a pair of scissors in his hand and very deftly circumcised the boys, one after another, even as they howled in pain and clung to their mothers' bosoms. The boys screamed for God's mercy at the very sight of the scissors in the doctor's hand.

'*Khodaya mornas ha!*' the boys screamed begging for God's help to relieve them of the excruciating pain.

'*Moji bachav,*' the assistant mercilessly imitated the boys' plea to their mothers.

'No one will save you from my scissors,' he would say to the boys, making a chop chop sound with the pair of scissors in his fingers.

The mothers would cry too, with their boys at the gruesome sight of blood dripping on the floor.

Dr Noorjan would then put bandages on the boys' penises and send them home. On their way back home, their mothers would buy them candyfloss. The hawker selling candyfloss near the Noor Medical Hall made good money. For days together the boys roamed without any shorts or pyjamas. They played in the street with the white bandages showing. It was only after several days that they were taken again to Dr Noorjan for removing the bandages.

Sridar remembered how his father's uncle, a moustached man whom he feared as a child once said, 'Sridar, don't be naughty. Otherwise, I will take you to Dr Noorjan for circumcision. I am not joking.' Later when Sridar realised that circumcision was not for Pandits, he felt immensely relieved.

'Thank God, I am not a Muslim,' Sridar said.

He was nervous when he wrote his first essay. His father Lasa, who taught at a school in Srinagar, had seen him obsessively scribble notes in a notebook even while watching television. For days Sridar did not come out of his room. He stopped playing cricket with his friends to complete his essay. During the nights, he could not sleep. There were times when he could not write, but gaped vacantly at the ceiling. Lasa saw him spend torturous nights caged in his room, trying to come to terms with the void which filled his heart. One moment there were words painted all over the pages and the next moment there were just blank pages. Finally, after days of struggle and confinement, he came out with a bunch of leaves.

'Tomorrow, I will show the essay at the school,' Sridar said to himself as he read the words slowly in his mind. He rejoiced at his writing. There was something in his writing that eluded him. Yet, he felt satiated to see the written words dance in front of him.

'How can a goat slaughter the butcher?' the English teacher asked Sridar when he read his essay. It was an essay on a butcher's shop; poetic and full of bizarre imagery. Sridar submitted the essay for publication in the school magazine.

Sridar had developed interest in books early in life. He wanted to become a writer. He maintained a journal from the age of eleven. His father had gifted him a notebook and encouraged him to write. Soon, writing and reading became an obsession. He enjoyed playing with words. In his school, he was the only one who could write good essays on the most unusual of subjects. The English teacher encouraged him to write more and read them aloud in the classroom.

'Your essays are remarkable. Keep writing. One day, people will read your writings with relish,' the teacher said to him, a little jealous of the young boy's capability to imagine the impossible.

A month later when the school closed for the winter holidays, Sridar set himself the task of filling all the pages in his journal with poems and essays.

One morning, Sridar awoke to a cold silence from a dream. It was a dream about death. In his dream he saw himself dying. This was the most recurrent of his dreams. There was a sense of déjà vu associated with this dream. He dreamt that he was dead before completing an essay he was writing. He had mastered the art of realising in sleep that he was dreaming a dream and that he could, at will, cease to dream the dream. While knowing that he was dreaming, he struggled in his dream to recollect the words and lines he had composed just before dying in the dream. Waking up from a dream always made him forget the words and the lines, but not the dream itself. Somehow, he longed to capture his dreams and remember the

lines he had composed while dreaming. He wished someone else dreamed the same dreams; someone else whom he loved and yearned to love.

He looked at the sky from the stained glass window of his room and held his hand to feel the snow. The snowflakes lit the night with an immense whiteness. Snow made the darkness disappear. He liked it when the snowflakes fell on the palm of his hand and melted instantly. The cobbled courtyard was wrapped up in a white blanket of snow. In the morning, he would be the first to make footprints on the snow, using the new pair of Duckback gumboots his father had bought for him before the onset of winter. He remembered his grandfather's promise to help him sculpt a snowman.

Sridar had spent the previous night writing an essay on the lamp post in the street. The street was dark. The lamp post leaned after a blanket of snow fell on it from the tin roof of a neighbour's four-storeyed house. The cold wind had shattered the lamp.

The water in the pipes remained frozen for days together.

Gowri, Sridar's grandmother, heated the water for Sridar. It was the only bath he was to take that month. The clock on the wall ticked laboriously. Sridar was used to looking at it for the time. Twenty-five minutes past four! Gowri had placed his clothes on a couple of *kangris* to take the cold out of them.

'After every life there is death, and there is life after death,' Sridar muttered as he tried to recollect his dream. He struggled to find the sheet of paper on which he had scribbled notes for his essay on the lamp post. The lamp post was his only friend during this winter. The sheet of paper had disappeared. It played wicked. Sridar fretted and gasped for breath. All he

could see was a pile of books, a sheaf of papers and some nicely cut birches he used as bookmarks. His grandmother shouted for him to get ready for the bath. He struggled to recollect the forgotten lines from his dream. His hands and feet fell cold. Laziness seeped into him from under the old quilt.

‘Coming in five minutes,’ he shouted from his room. In the cold winters, people bathed only once a month in the mornings and then retired to their beds once again. There was paucity of firewood for heating the water and of charcoal for the kangris. There would be no electricity for days together. It did not matter that much. Mahanandju’s family had gotten used to living without it. The kerosene lanterns illuminated the rooms. There was nothing to be done during the winter days. No one ventured out in the cold.

Sridar spent the days sitting at the window and looking at the snow fall silently on the leafless willows, and the crows perched atop the electric wires. In the mornings, he would open the window and count the icicles hanging from the edge of a roof. Then, he would aim a pebble at the longest icicle and watch it shatter to bits.

Mahanandju’s house was a few minutes’ walk from Yarbāl, the bank of the river Jhelum. The house could be seen clearly from the Nalla-e-Maer, once a canal, now a road. The *doonga* dwellers had constructed big houses, and the road was used by the various cricket teams of the locality for tournaments. The house was one of the largest in the entire locality, and from the topmost storey one could see the boys play cricket on the Nalla-e-Maer road. During summers, creepers draped a small portion of the house.

Sridar’s room was full of books, and his writing desk was so well-organised that he never invited any of his friends and

classmates home for fear of disturbing the harmony of his belongings. The stained glass window of his room was always half-open, even in harsh winters, for him to watch the snow fall. His room overlooked the large uneven courtyard adorned with a tapestry of tiles and cobbles. A willow tree, which his grandfather had planted many years back, sprawled in the courtyard. Another room overlooked the Eidgah, where people celebrated Eid, youngsters flew kites and played football, and urchins plucked water chestnuts from a pond. At a distance, one could see smoke emanate from the chimneys of the houses of the Tibetans. The occupants of this settlement were Tibetan refugees, who had made this place their home. In the summers the pretty Tibetan girls would sing songs and lure the passersby to purchase the sweaters knitted by the women. From one of the latticed windows of Mahanandju's room, one could see a graveyard. Abdul Gani, Mahanandju's friend and neighbour for years, worked as a gravedigger there. Lasa's bedroom overlooked a plot of vacant land, which belonged to a neighbour. The sweeper of the locality parked his wheelbarrow at the edge of the land. The lamp post, which Sridar liked so much, stood forlorn in the corner of the street. Gulakhar, the ironsmith of the locality and father of two girls, the beautiful Nusrat and the mad Tota, always sat at the window of his dilapidated house, which was just across the narrow lane, opposite Mahanandju's house.

Lasa had renovated the house and converted part of the courtyard into a kitchen garden. He had got the ceilings of all the rooms decorated with mats of hay. Beautiful terracotta tiles adorned the floors of the corridor and the living room. A water heater was installed for heating the water during the winter.

In winter there was nothing much to do, except wait for the winter to end. The newspapers from Delhi didn't arrive when the road to Srinagar closed for days because of the heavy snowfall and landslides. And when the road opened, people waited for hours at Ali's bookshop to grab their copies of the newspapers. The old newspapers were still in demand.

Sridar read story books to pass time. He stole potatoes from the kitchen and immersed them in the warm ash of the kangri for roasting. When the sun came out, he watched the icicles melt, one-by-one, and felt sad. He grew tired of looking at the mynahs perched on the electric wires. Winters were long, cold and lifeless. He looked forward to the day when his grandfather would accompany him to the doongas, swaying silently in the water by the banks of the river Jhelum, to barter old clothes and household items for a sack of rice and wheat.

When Sridar awoke after the dream, he realised that his essay on the lamp post did not yet exist on paper. He realised that he had composed a few lines in a dream, the memory of which was lost. He could not recollect either the images or the lines. The only shard of memory that remained was of a procession of mourners, who emerged from a neighbour's house to attend the burial of a dead man. Sridar had to start writing his essay afresh. He was not in a hurry. Winter painted his dreams white. He thought of the coming spring when he would meet his friends at school and visit his relatives in the village during the festivals.

In spring Sridar accompanied his grandparents to Pampore. Every year he looked forward to his visit to the village, so that he could meet his cousins and spend the days playing in the saffron fields. Devi, the cow, had given birth to a splendid calf. It was a celebration. The women cooked mutton every day,

while the men dispatched the farm produce to the wholesalers in Srinagar. Children had complete freedom to play in the saffron fields and the orchards. In the evenings they waited by the roadside to wave at the tourists on their way to Srinagar and even ran to shake hands with some of them who got down from the buses to look at the undulating fields.

Sridar and his cousins played with the cycle wheels all day long. Each one of them stole a cycle wheel, and drove it in and around the narrow lanes. Sridar used a stick to drive the wheel fast, and rested in the shade of a huge *chinar* in the midst of a saffron field. When he got tired of the cycle play and felt hungry, he stole apples from the attic of the house. When the attic was locked, he demanded freshly baked *lavasas*. At night the children slept in the attic. To make them sleep early the eldest cousin narrated stories to them, and they all huddled under quilts and fell asleep only to wake up early the next morning, catch hold of the cycle wheels once again, and run towards the chinar tree in the midst of the vast saffron fields. Sridar liked to play with Devi, the cow, and feed the calf with strands of hay.

Leaving Pampore after a stay of a few days always made Sridar sad. Upon return to his house in Srinagar, he would be devastated with a sense of nostalgia. For days he would cry alone in his room. The memory of the saffron fields and the village lured him to the past. He would dream of the next holiday in the village.

Sridar had started going to Professor Wakhlu's tuition classes to study Mathematics in order to prepare for the tenth standard examination. His father knew Professor Wakhlu, who taught at the Gandhi Memorial College in Srinagar and was the most popular teacher in Srinagar. Every day Professor

Wakhlu taught eight batches of students. He was known for making even the duffers pass the school exams in Mathematics. The early morning batch, in which Sridar studied, consisted of sixteen students. Sridar's friends and classmates, Anil and Rahul, studied in the same batch. Everybody sat cross-legged in a semicircle and stared at the sheet of paper on which the professor hurriedly scribbled notes on algebra and geometry.

The batch was in its second month when one day it was unusually interrupted by Professor Wakhlu's servant, a boy from Kishtwar. The servant entered the room and announced the arrival of two visitors at the gate downstairs. Professor Wakhlu stepped out of the room to check on the strangers. The next batch of students waited anxiously at the door.

A student outside the room whispered, 'Billa Puj is downstairs.'

'Who is Billa Puj?' another student asked.

Sridar was puzzled and clueless. Anil pinched him and whispered something in his ear.

'Billa Puj is a goon of this area. He owns a butcher's shop at Gaw Kadal. Don't you know that his brother Majid is a militant and works for the Kashmir Liberation Front? Hilal says that he is back from the training camp in Azad Kashmir, and now roams with a *Chhakir* and *Rof* under his pheran.'

Chhakir and Rof were code names invented by Sridar's classmate Hilal for Kalashnikov and AK47.

Sridar wanted to catch a glimpse of the visitors. He stood up quietly, hid behind a curtain and looked at the men talking downstairs. He saw the professor talk with the two men. One of them was clean-shaven, a handsome man in his mid-twenties. He wore a denim shirt and a pair of blue jeans. The other one was a bearded chap.

'The tall man in jeans is Billa Puj,' someone said to Sridar. 'They call him Billa because of his blue eyes. Haven't you seen him and his coterie loiter outside our school in the recess? They come to ogle at the girls? Everyone fears Billa.'

Sridar tried hard to remember if he had seen him near his school.

Professor Wakhlu nodded constantly as Billa Puj went on talking. Soon afterwards, he shook hands with the visitors and returned to the room. He looked perturbed and bit his nails. He couldn't resume scribbling notes on the sheet of paper. He asked his servant to get him a cup of tea. The students wanted to leave so that the next batch could start. He told the students waiting outside the room to leave. When those who were in the room stepped out in the corridor to put on their shoes, he announced that the next day would be a holiday for all.

'I have some urgent work to attend to,' the professor said and closed the door of the room.

The next day when the first batch of students arrived at Professor Wakhlu's house at 5:30 in the morning, they found the gate locked. The windows were shut, too. The balcony was draped in an old *gabba*.

A hastily written note pasted on the door read:

My wife and I had to leave to be with our son. We will be back in a month. Till then, continue your studies.

By the evening a rumour floated in the area. It didn't take more than a day for the students to unravel the mystery. Very early in the morning the professor and his wife had left. They never returned.

Sridar thought of the incident as a joke. He was overjoyed to hear about Professor Wakhlu's departure from his house. He

was relieved to get rid of the dreary tuition lessons. For him the notes on algebra and geometry were useless.

'No more tuitions and no more waking up early,' Sridar told Anil and Rahul. He thought of playing cricket with his friends at the Tatoo ground and playing truant to watch movies at the Neelam cinema near his school.

Later Anil told Sridar and Rahul what he had heard.

'The college is abuzz with rumours. Many Pandit professors who run tuition centers in their houses are talking about Professor Wakhlu's sudden disappearance. They are scared that Bilal or some other goons may visit them also. Someone in the college said that Bilal Puj wanted to settle an old score with Professor Wakhlu. He may have shown the professor Chhakir and Rof.'



Mukhtiar and Basharat, the two brothers, were Sridar's neighbours and schoolmates. Mukhtiar was two classes junior to Sridar. The brothers played cricket for the cricket team of their locality. Their father Abdul Gani and uncle Afsal Gani were gravediggers. People from even across Yarbhal came to lay their loved ones to rest in the graveyard. Abdul Gani had taken pains to nurture a beautiful garden in the middle of the graveyard. In spring he grew pansies around the graves. Splendid weeping willows encircled the graves of the rich and the famous. The forefathers of some of the prominent Muslim families were buried there. The Shahs, who traded in the Shahtoosh; the Paithghars, who exported carpets to Europe; the Ismails, who reared the finest doves and pigeons; and the Khans, who were the first to bring camels to Kashmir!

The Ganis had been in the graveyard business for many generations. Their forefathers too were gravediggers. For Abdul, the graveyard was his life. He looked after it as though it were his own garden. He dreamt of becoming rich, and rarely had the money to buy any gifts for his wife.

Shaha, Abdul Gani's wife, was a good friend of Sridar's grandmother. Their houses faced each other. They used to talk through the windows of the fourth floor of their houses while winnowing rice.

Mukhtiar was twelve and Basharat eighteen when Abdul Gani decided to separate from his elder brother Afsal Gani. The frequent squabbles between the wives of the two brothers contributed to the animosity. The neighbourhood was rife with rumours about how the elder sister-in-law had selfish designs to incite her husband against his younger brother and his wife.

As summer set in, the Gani brothers finally separated. Both brothers decided to divide the living between them. They also constructed separate kitchens and living rooms in their house to live as two families.

One evening Abdul Gani came to meet Mahanandju.

Gani narrated his sad situation to him and added how he and his wife were going through hell with the constant nagging of his conniving and irate sister-in-law.

'Doctor Sahib, I went to all the Muslim families and told them that my brother and I had separated and that they belonged to me after death,' Abdul Gani said to Mahanandju.

Mahanandju was amused to hear Abdul describe the way the brothers had divided the Muslim families in the locality amongst themselves, so that there was no confusion and dispute at the time of a person's death.

Abdul Gani continued his plea, 'Now, I have come to you to help me win the other families. I know your word will work like magic in our neighbourhood, especially with the rich Majids, the Gaffars, and the Shahs. They will certainly change their mind and choose their resting places in the graves dug by me.'

'Don't worry Abdul, your honesty and hard work will be rewarded,' Mahanandju replied nonchalantly. 'I will certainly put in a good word for you. Those who rightfully belong to you while alive will surely belong to you after death. Who can change destiny?'

'After all, it is my hard work all these years which provided bread to my brother and his family. He never helped me in times of need. And now, his conniving wife poisons him against me. You know it very well, don't you Doctor Sahib?' Abdul added contemptuously, trying to justify his thinking and hatred for his brother.

Abdul Gani lit a cigarette and sighed at his dilemma. He was not sure if this was the right thing to do for a pious and God-fearing Muslim, but he seemed relieved at Mahanandju's assurance.

When Gani left, Mahanandju laughed in the heart of hearts over the division of the living and the dead. He told Gowri nothing.

Later that night, Mahanandju dreamt a dream. It was an unfamiliar place with familiar trees. Gani was standing under a fruit-laden tree. A black cow was grazing nearby. When Gani saw Mahanandju, he twitched and then farted. Mahanandju smiled and neared Gani.

'Don't come near me, Doctor Sahib. Keep standing where you are. An agitation will be launched in Kashmir. I saw a

letter in the mosque. There will be a rebellion against India. The mujahedeen will infiltrate into Kashmir from across the border and take over the Valley. People will come out in the streets and wage a war; men, women and children, everyone. Every Muslim has been given a task to accomplish. Even the muezzin of the mosque has to perform a new role in this movement to liberate Kashmir, and save Islam from the infidels. Nizam-e-Mustafa will dawn over us.'

'What about us?' Mahanandju asked.

'The Pandits should either join the movement or leave Kashmir. Destiny has been written for us. We will be independent. Our children will live in peace in independent Kashmir. Everyone is waiting for that day. The judgement will be pronounced in favour of the sufferers, the Muslims.'

'When is this going to start Abdul?'

'Soon, very soon! Insha'Allah!' Abdul Gani said.

Mahanandju awoke with a shudder. His mouth was dry and his heart was beating fast. He had a glass of water and kept awake for a long time. Later in the morning, he narrated the dream to Gowri.

'Some days back, I overheard Shaha talking to Ismail's daughter-in-law about people taking to arms,' Gowri replied while winnowing rice. 'Maybe, she was spinning a yarn to befool us. Your dream is humbug. There is no reason for us to worry.'

'Do dreams come true?' Mahanandju wondered. 'No, no. I can't believe this. But sometimes they do.'



During a cricket match in a temple compound, near the banks of Jhelum, Mukhtiar told the Pandit boys that his brother

Basharat had quietly disappeared from his home. He narrated an incident that had taken place the previous week, when two bearded strangers had visited their home and handed over a small packet to Basharat. Basharat was known to be quite shy and had failed twice in the examination. He assisted his father at the graveyard. After Basharat's disappearance, many people in the neighbourhood thought that he had eloped with a girl. But Mukhtiar told Sridar that Basharat had gone across the border to undergo training in handling weapons. He had been chosen and handpicked by the area commander of the Liberation Front himself.

'Basharat will stay at the training camp for a month, and then return to take charge of the locality. They say that he will bring guns and other weapons to fight for the liberation of our Kashmir,' Mukhtiar confided.

That evening Sridar learnt that his father had already come to know of Basharat's disappearance. The Pandit families near Yarbāl were already suspicious of the sudden turn of events.

'You must not discuss Basharat's disappearance with anyone,' Tathia warned. Tathia lived in the neighbourhood and had come to have tea with Lasa, but ended up sharing his fear with Lasa.

He spoke with subdued fear.

'Lasa, why do you refuse to believe what is happening in Kashmir? Have you forgotten how Wangnoo was killed in broad daylight outside the court in Lal Chowk in the presence of bystanders! No one went near him when he breathed his last.'

Wangnoo had been a judge. Many Pandits believed that Wangnoo figured in the hit list and had ignored the warnings given to him by the militants.

'There is no need to fear Tathia. Nothing will happen to the Pandits. We have been living together with Muslims for hundreds of years,' Lasa said.

'Why don't you feel the change Lasa? There was never any trust between the Pandits and the Muslims. We were always the target. They think we are the agents of India.'

Tathia mentioned that he had heard of a hit list prepared by a militant outfit, known as the Hizbul Mujahedeen (HM). The hit list contained names of the Muslims and the Pandits to be killed. Lasa refused to believe all this. Tathia feared that different militant outfits would prepare different hit lists.

'There is no hit list. These are all rumours. We must not panic,' Lasa said trying to comfort and reassure Tathia.

'We can trust one. But can we trust the many? Can we trust the guns which are hidden in their pherans? Who are the guns for? Teenagers will be given names and addresses of Pandits so that they can practise killing. Their heart bleeds for Pakistan!'

'What should we do?' Lasa asked.

'They say we must prepare to leave.'

In a few days' time, Basharat's disappearance from his house had become the talk of the locality. The Pandit community got alarmed at how Muslims hailed Basharat a hero, who would return to fight for the liberation of Kashmir.



Lasa spent many evenings at Ali's bookshop. They had been friends for a long time. They walked on the Bund every Friday and talked about people and politics. Ali was like family to Lasa. All of Lasa's books came from Ali's bookshop. On many

occasions, Ali refused to accept the money for the books which Sridar bought for his reading.

It was on a Friday when Lasa and Ali stopped for tea at the Zero Bridge. Preparations for Eid were underway. The shops were decorated with new tapestries.

As Lasa and Ali sipped tea silently at the roadside restaurant, the owner of the restaurant switched on the radio and put on Radio Azad Kashmir. An old film song was playing. At the end of the song, the announcer read out the names of the people who had requested for the song.

'This song was requested by Abdul Satar, Malik and Razaq from Sopore, Tanveer from Noor Bagh, Abdul Beig from Maisuma, Ajaz Malik and Imtiaz from Kupwara, Mustaq Zargar and Shana from Nowhatta, Srinagar . . . this is Radio Azad Kashmir,' the announcer rattled on.

Suddenly, the customers and the passersby gathered to listen to the announcement of the names of people who had requested the film songs. Lasa was surprised at the unusual interest shown by the people in the announcement. He suspected something strange. The onlookers listened keenly with frozen faces. At the end of the announcement, many rubbed their eyes, heaved sighs of relief and shook hands. Others lisped some prayers and moved on.

Ali also listened patiently to the announcement. He held his breath till the end of the announcement.

Ali thought to himself, 'They have reached the training camps in Azad Kashmir. God is with them. The names of the others may be announced tomorrow.'

Ali said to Lasa, 'I like these songs. I had also requested for a song. They might play it tomorrow.'

'But you didn't listen to the songs,' Lasa said. 'You heard the names only. What is this?'

Ali thought, 'Lasa shouldn't know. He is a Pandit.'

Lasa and Ali walked from Zero Bridge to Lal Chowk. At the bus stop, they boarded a minibus to Nawa Kadal. Lasa was the lone Pandit in the minibus. As the bus reached Nawa Bazaar, a funeral procession halted the traffic on the road. The body of a Muslim youth, who had been shot dead by a jawan during a protest, was being taken for burial. Hundreds of men, women and children joined the procession. They sang, 'Fear not the enemy. Victory will be ours. *Azadi . . . azadi . . .*'

Everyone in the minibus raised their middle and pointing finger to form a 'V'. Ali looked at Lasa and winked. Lasa smiled and showed his V. The conductor of the minibus smiled when he heard Lasa say 'Azadi'. He knew he was a Pandit.

When they got down from the minibus at Nawa Kadal, Ali wanted to buy some oranges from a roadside hawker.

'How much for a dozen?' Ali asked.

'Twelve rupees,' the hawker said, wiping the oranges which were loaded on the cart.

Ali made a gesture as if he had hidden something under his pheran.

'Twelve rupees! Even for people from the *tanzeem!*' Ali growled. He frowned and feigned anger and displeasure.

The hawker stopped wiping the oranges and looked at Ali. He shivered and changed his tone.

'I beg your pardon sir. I am sorry for my mistake. Please take two dozen oranges. Free. For your family and friends too!'

With trembling hands the hawker hastily put two dozen oranges in a plastic bag and handed it over to Ali.

'That is like a true Kashmiri Muslim,' Ali said as he took the bag. He winked at Lasa. Both of them burst into a fit of laughter as they entered a narrow alley.

Lasa and Ali walked together through the narrow lanes towards their houses and laughed at the prank. Their conversation was dotted with intermittent spells of drizzle. The smell of rain wafted in the air.

'People have started believing in Azadi. Will Kashmir gain freedom?' Ali wondered.

Lasa lit a cigarette and smiled a broken smile. Ali bid him farewell at Yarbali. Lasa walked towards the bank of the river. He stood near the doongas and looked at the river flow quietly. Dark clouds eclipsed the sun. At a distance, a sweeper swept the withered leaves of the willows from the pavement and collected them in his wheelbarrow.

Lasa walked to his home.

That night Lasa thought about the changes which he was witnessing in the neighbourhood.

Pandit Nilkanth was the best conversationalist in the school where Lasa and he taught. Being very erudite, he quoted from the Hindu scriptures and the Quran. He spoke on literature, art, religion, politics, history and mythology. At the school, he taught Physics but never discussed Physics in the school staffroom. He was the only person to own a telescope in Kashmir. He was a regular at the wedding ceremonies because he would meet friends and acquaintances and get an opportunity to speak on different topics. Lasa and Nilkanth used to have heated discussions on history, politics, religion and Sufism.

Earlier, a boy had disappeared from the school. The students whispered about his disappearance. So did the teaching staff in the staffroom.

On their way back home from school, Nilkanth told Lasa to prepare to leave Kashmir.

‘It is becoming worse for us in Kashmir, Lasa. This winter will be the last for us in our motherland, *Maej Kashir*,’ Nilkanth uttered.

He could not help speak in metaphors and puzzles. He wanted to talk about the disappearance of the boy from the school. He was disturbed because of something else, which he was unable to fathom.

‘I don’t see the respect in the eyes of our Muslim friends anymore,’ he said to Lasa. ‘The looks in their eyes are threatening and menacing. Did you hear how the boy’s brother Javed slapped and humiliated Zutshi in the classroom?’

‘They have lost their senses. They don’t know what they are doing. They will soon realise the blunders,’ Lasa said.

‘We should pack up our belongings and leave. Otherwise, we will be butchered one by one and thrown into the Vitasta.’

‘The situation will change Nilkanth. We should not be scared of these incidents. This shall pass soon. We should not allow some stray incidents to rob us of our sleep,’ Lasa argued.

‘Our women and children should not stay here with us. Send your mother, wife and son away from Kashmir. Do not wait any longer. Downtown is no longer safe for us.’

Downtown had become a place for the downtrodden. Narrow lanes, dirty drains flowing through the lanes and bylanes, foul stench, broken pavements, muddy corners, broken water pipes across the roads, criss-cross electric wires hanging from the street lamp posts! In winters there was neither water nor electricity. Firewood was the only hope for the people to keep themselves warm.

The government embarked on a massive development programme wherein modern toilets were constructed free of cost in the compounds of the houses. The poor sanitary conditions were fast becoming a nuisance for all. Many residents had protested against the bad drainage system in their localities. Filth and garbage flowed in the drains and blockages often resulted in atrocious stench. The drains carried all the filth into the river Jhelum. Even the doonga dwellers had protested against such insanitary conditions.

Abdul Gani was excited at the news of construction of toilets. He looked forward to having a new toilet constructed in the compound of his house. For years he and his family had used a country toilet, which needed a sweeper to clean it every morning and evening. In winters they used to bury the shit in snow. Every family in the neighbourhood eagerly awaited their turn to have the toilets in their old houses replaced by the new ones with septic tanks. Abdul Gani requested the contractors to build two new toilets in the courtyard of his house, owing to the split in the family. His wish was granted.

Many days later when the toilets were still not ready for use, two young men forced their way into Abdul Gani's house with tin trunks painted black. They wore dark green pherans, jeans and sports shoes. It was late in the evening. One of them asked Abdul to remove the lid of the newly constructed septic tank in the courtyard. They wanted to keep the trunks in one of the pits. Abdul Gani did not ask any questions. His wife hid in the kitchen. The men buried the trunks in the pit and handed over a packet to Abdul.

'Keep this packet,' the man said to Abdul. 'Buy some good eats and clothes for the children. Teach them songs of freedom.'

'You have done a good deed. Glory to the freedom fighters! Glory to independent Kashmir!' proclaimed the other youth.

The visitors left in the dead of night and disappeared in the mist. Their only introduction was that they were freedom fighters.

'What is in the trunks?' Abdul's wife Shaha asked him late in the night. 'Guns?' she wondered.

'Quiet! Do not breathe a word of this to anyone in the neighbourhood,' Gani said to her admonishingly. 'Not even to your brothers! If someone asks you, tell them that these trunks contain spades and shovels for digging graves. Tomorrow, I will ask our workers to sow *haakh* saplings in the soil over the pits. No one should know of this.'

'This *haakh* can kill,' Shaha mocked beating her chest.

The next morning, Abdul summoned two of his best men from the graveyard and asked them to get along shovels and other tools used for digging. He asked them to get some soil in the wheelbarrow. Instantly, they poured the soil from the graveyard over the lid of the pit. Abdul watched the scene in childish bewilderment. Once the lids were covered with soil, Abdul sowed *haakh* saplings in it.

'The kitchen garden is ready now!' he exclaimed, happy and content.

Months later Abdul heard of the death of his eldest son Basharat. He had been killed while crossing the border over to Azad Kashmir. Life was never the same for Abdul, Shaha and Mukhtiar. Their days became hard and silent. Mukhtiar vowed to avenge his brother's death. Some weeks later, Mukhtiar too died in crossfire at the Nalle-e-Maer. He was pelting stones at an army convoy when a volley of firing broke out from behind the houses. A stray bullet hit him in his chest and killed him

instantly. No one could tell who had fired the bullet. But they blamed the army. Abdul buried his son in his graveyard. The area commander of the Liberation Front hailed the boy as the youngest freedom fighter in the locality, who had laid down his life for the freedom of his land.

Sridar was sad that he could not return the catapult he had borrowed from Mukhtiar.

Abdul and Shaha were devastated. The death of their two sons had destroyed their spirit and broken their will to live. Shaha turned into a silent and frail woman. She spent her days gaping at the wall of the room. Gowri comforted her and tried to engage her in conversations about the locality.

As days progressed, there were funeral processions all the time in the streets. A portion of land at Eidgah was converted into a graveyard and named the 'Freedom Graveyard'. Children had stopped playing football and flying kites in the ground. There were graves all around and tombstones with names and dates. Most of the dead were in their twenties.



There was a vacant plot of land in front of Mahanandju's house, where Bilal Khor's father kept his tonga. Bilal Khor was known for his hooliganism in the neighbourhood. He was always accompanied by some goons, who tried to instil fear in the residents. He was feared by the women in the neighbourhood except Tota Maecz, the eldest daughter of Gulakhar, the ironsmith. Tota laughed voraciously whenever Bilal shouted at her in the street. Gulakhar lived in a small house opposite Mahanandju's. Tota Maecz was born with a mental disability. After her mother's death, Tota was completely dependent upon

her younger sister Nusrat. Nusrat used to leave Tota on the pavement in the mornings and fetch her back in the evenings. Tota spent the days there, laughing hysterically at the passersby. She wore the same clothes for days together, except on Eid when she wore a new pheran. Tota's laughter scared away children. She laughed whenever people walked past her. Bilal Khor made fun of her and made faces at her. Gulakhar did not come out of his house for days together. Mostly, he lived a life in hiding, visible only in the frame of the window. He repaired saddles for the horses owned by Bilal's father. He visited nobody and nobody ever visited him.

There was something in Nusrat's adolescence which attracted Sridar. She was dusky and had luscious lips. She looked beautiful when she wore her light green pheran. Sridar liked to think she loved him. Whenever Sridar walked past her house, she would say something naughty and sweet.

'Let me hold your hand Sridar. Otherwise, you will fall in the mud puddle,' she would say to Sridar whenever he jumped over the mud puddle on the street.

Sridar would blush and walk past her. He was too shy to talk to Nusrat. It was difficult not to notice Nusrat's attractive smile. In his thoughts, he desired to touch that smile. The kohl of her eyes made him desire her. Nusrat never confessed her love for Sridar. Her playful signs towards Sridar made him happy and enticed him to play along. In his adolescent dreams, Sridar kissed her a thousand times and held her hand. In his thoughts, Sridar longed for one kiss. He waited for the kiss every day, when he walked past Nusrat's house. On his way back from school, Sridar would look for Nusrat. On some days, she waited for him at the corner of the street where no one would notice her. She always whispered something lovely.

Gulakhar and his two daughters lived in abject poverty. They had nothing, except the house with a broken roof. When winter set in, life was difficult for Gulakhar and his two daughters. Tota spent less time on the street. Nusrat kept her indoors and combed her hair once a week. The tin roof of their house had caved in and there was no money to repair it. Gulakhar used some of the old and discarded saddles given to him by Bilal's father to fill the gaps in the roof, so that he could prevent the snow from falling into their living room. The first floor of the house was completely dilapidated. Gulakhar did not fear his wretched condition. Shaha had told Sridar's grandmother that Gulakhar did not earn enough to feed his family everyday. Once a week, he would go to the bank of Jhelum to wash clothes. Fearful of being offered alms by the strangers, he offered the namaz at home even on Fridays. In his ability to hide his poverty behind the veil of loneliness, Gulakhar had won the hearts of the neighbours. No one knew why he always refused the alms offered to him by the mosque.

People in the locality abandoned themselves to revelry and celebration on Eid. The Muslim families slaughtered sheep in the courtyards of their houses. Sridar hated the sight of blood flowing in the drains. Habib was a very busy man during the time the festivities lasted. He was entrusted with the job of cleaning the street and the drains. The Ganis hired a butcher to slaughter sheep. Shaha distributed the pieces of mutton among her neighbours.

Sridar looked forward to visiting the Eidgah with his grandfather early in the morning. Mahanandju took Sridar on his old bicycle to a willow grove beyond Eidgah to listen to the songs of the hoopoe. And he taught Sridar to create the sound by blowing into the small opening, while holding both

palms tightly together. The sound went gu-guu-gu, gu-guu-gu. In the evening, Sridar counted the coins he received from the elders to buy kites and marbles.

It was on Eid that Sridar's secret wish to hold Nusrat's hands came true. Nusrat had come to the Ganis to take home her portion of mutton. She had borrowed a large wooden bowl from Sridar's grandmother. With the bowl of meat trembling in her hand, she walked towards Sridar, who stood near the door. Shaha had filled the bowl with meat to the brim. Sridar had returned from Eidgah and was standing by the side of a wall at Gani's courtyard to take home a bowl full of mutton. Seeing Sridar, Nusrat turned back and decided to leave the house through the other door. Sridar garnered strength and courage, and followed Nusrat. He made sure no one saw him follow her. He grabbed a shovel lying in Gani's courtyard and pretended to return it to its place near the backdoor. Before Nusrat reached the backdoor at the other end of the courtyard, Sridar overtook her and waited. It was a dark alley. When Nusrat reached for the doorknob, Sridar caught hold of her hand and took away the bowl of meat from her. He kept the bowl on the ground and held her hands in his palms and clasped them in a tight clasp. Blood rushed through Sridar's veins. He felt a wild desire to brush his cheeks against hers. He looked at her large ear lobes. He wanted to lick the kohl from her eyelids. Moments passed, Nusrat picked up the bowl of meat and ran towards the end of the street.

Sridar was never to forget the touch of Nusrat's trembling hands. He had felt love for the first time in his life. Nusrat had smiled and blushed. From then on, she did not whisper anything in Sridar's ear. However, at sundown she waited to catch a glimpse of him at the corner of the street, when it was

time to fetch Tota from the street. If Sridar was not there, she would wait longer on the pretext of allowing Tota to devour a lavasa given to her by some Pandit neighbour.

On his way back home from the clinic where he used to examine his patients, Mahanandju would stop at his friends' shops in the neighbourhood. Gota, the maker of kites and pinwheels; Qadir Goor, the milkman; Juma Saecz, the tailor; and Shambu Nath, the tobacconist, who sold exquisite tobacco and items meant for Pandit rituals and ceremonies. Their shops were quaint as were their conversations. Mahanandju was most friendly with Juma Saecz, at whose shop he sat and talked about the affairs of the locality.

Gota's colourful pinwheels were popular among the children of the locality. He adorned his shop with scores of them. Blue, white, yellow, purple, green, brown, pink, violet, and black! The pinwheels fluttered all day in the wonderful breeze. His grandchildren ran near the shop holding bright pinwheels in their hands. Whenever Mahanandju stopped at Gota's shop, Gota always sent a pinwheel for Sridar to play with. The pinwheels found their way to Sridar's room as decoration on the bookshelf. Later, Gota taught Sridar how to make them.

The pocket of Mahanandju's pheran was never empty. It was always filled with secret somethings for Sridar. Mahanandju would reach for his pocket and hold forth a handful of dates, raisins, almonds and *shireen*.

'My goodies?' Sridar would always ask Mahanandju when he returned home from his work.

Mahanandju never came home without goodies for his grandson.

Qadir Goor was known for selling the most delectable curd in the locality. His forefathers too had been in the dairy business.

Early morning people queued up at the door of his cowshed to buy fresh warm milk. Sridar loved to accompany Mahanandju in the morning to buy milk at Qadir Goor's cowshed. The smell of old books in his grandfather's library at home and the smell in Qadir Goor's cowshed remained with him always.

Although he was notorious for street fights and igniting the wars of the quarrelling doonga dwellers, Bilal Khor was not anti-social at heart. He enjoyed playing pranks in the neighbourhood and treated Sridar like a younger brother.

'You have no one to fear, Sridar, so long as I am alive,' Bilal boasted. 'If any goons bother you at school, tell them that you are Bilal's brother.'

'Khor' was the nickname given to him by his accomplices, his coterie, wayward young boys of the *mohalla*, who wore jeans and prided themselves as the gangsters of Yarbal. Bilal's father operated a tonga from Khankah-i-Sokhta to other places in the downtown. His business wasn't that good. During summer holidays, Sridar's grandmother hired the tonga to Vichar Nag to visit a Sufi saint who resided there.

When Bilal saw Sridar driving a deserted wheelbarrow in the narrow lane, he laughed and promised to gift him one. It was Sridar's dream to own a wheelbarrow and drive it to his school. Although Mahanandju had reprimanded him many times for touching the wheelbarrow used by the sweeper in the locality, Sridar never missed an opportunity to stealthily drive it. It was the sheer pleasure of driving the wheelbarrow which made Sridar ignore his grandfather's reprimand. He would not mind a gentle slap. It was too small a price to pay for such heavenly pleasure. Seeing his grandson's unwavering and zestful passion for driving a wheelbarrow, Mahanandju gifted him a cycle wheel.

Sridar was excited to see his new gift. He drove the cycle wheel every time his grandmother sent him to buy lavasas at the baker in the mornings. His grandfather helped him paint the cycle wheel blue and adorn it with two bells.

One evening when Sridar was walking back from his tuition lessons at Karan Nagar, he saw an army convoy marching down the road. It was a chain of olive green armoured vehicles that he had seen only in the war movies at the Palladium in Lal Chowk. Jawans in camouflage looked menacingly from their vehicles at the houses and the pedestrians.

From that day onwards, the army convoys became a regular feature on the Nalle-e-Maer. The local newspapers wrote about the freedom struggle. Fear ruled the hearts of the Pandits, and they became suspicious of the Muslim neighbours and friends with whom they had shared close bonds for years. The same fear shattered the love Muslims had for the Pandits. The Pandits became suspects – informers and agents of India.

Sridar's passion for driving the cycle wheel in the streets did not last long. In some months, he was to appear in the annual examination at his school. He was forced to spend more time at home, preparing for the exams. He feared that he might fail. He was not good at rote. All he wanted to do was to write stories and essays.

Stone pelting at the army bunkers became an obsession with the Muslim youths. The first expression of anger and hate against the domination of India was in terms of bricks, gravel and stones hurled at the convoys of the security forces. AK47 guns became a common sight. The militants emerged from dark alleys and corners and fired at the soldiers keeping vigil behind the sandbag bunkers. The soldiers fired back at the militants.

Mahanandju recalled how a year earlier there was no news to broadcast on the television or the radio. Every morning, the people in the neighbourhood sat close to their radios and listened to the episodes of the radio drama 'Zoon Dab'. To miss an episode was like a day wasted. And in the evenings, they immersed themselves in the soulful songs of Habba Khatoon. Newsreaders read out long passages about the glorious autumn attracting tourists from all parts of the world, the burning of the withered leaves and logs of wood to produce charcoal for the kangris, and the spotting of hangul in the Dachigam sanctuary. There were days when nothing happened at all in the villages, and even in Srinagar. Every day was like the previous one. Every day began with the muezzin's call in the morning. And it ended again with the muezzin's call in the evening. Life moved slowly. People performed the routine tasks. Tota's laughter, Shaha's winnowing, Habib's sweeping the filth in the drains, and Mahanandju's stopping at Juma's shop in the evening and listening to the news on the radio! Only the colourful marbles catapulted from children's fingers in different directions! And the colours of the pinwheels made by Gota were different each day!

The month of fasting brought some respite from the violence in the city. The security forces imposed curfew during the night to contain violence. Curfew was relaxed for a few hours in the mornings for the residents to buy groceries. Lasa would send Sridar to Mohammad Nata's shop to buy cigarettes.

The army convoys and the fearful armoured vehicles marched the roads of the city at all times. The faces of soldiers betrayed anger and hate. Their eyes constantly surveyed the narrow lanes, from where they feared grenades would be hurled upon them. The rocket launcher became a toy every teenager aspired

to possess. The Kalashnikov rifles that had been buried in the kitchen gardens in the previous season were exhumed by the militants, and distributed to the boys who wanted to join the uprising and be part of the resistance against Indian rule.

There was only one slogan on people's lips: 'Freedom from India! Free Kashmir!'

The new song everyone sang was, 'We want freedom, we want freedom!' The songs of freedom were broadcast from the loudspeakers to remind people of their duty to fight for the cause and join the freedom struggle. Children were made to memorise the songs. The carpet weavers, the doonga dwellers, the craftsmen, the bus conductors and the labourers were asked to sing these songs while they were at work.

The Pandits listened to the songs in fright and didn't know what to do. They waited helplessly for things to unfold and confined themselves to their houses.

On the last day of the holy month of Ramzan, a stone pelting incident during a funeral procession on the Zero Bridge in the morning led to a massacre. A young militant had been shot dead by the security forces near Lal Chowk, after he had gunned down two soldiers and hurled a grenade at the army bunker near the Shankaracharya temple. A soldier had taken aim and fired two bullets from his rifle piercing the militant's stomach. In the evening the mourners defied curfew orders and took out his funeral procession on the main road. The procession headed towards the Freedom Graveyard. Men, women and children mourned the death of the militant. They termed his death the 'supreme sacrifice', the 'most sacred martyrdom', and prayed for his soul. Women beat their chests in anger and hate. Some masked militants brandished their weapons; the Kalashnikov, the AK47 and the pistols. From across the bridge,

gunfire erupted. The soldiers opened fire from a bunker across the road. The mourners dispersed. The men carrying the coffin on their shoulders rushed to hide in the narrow lane behind the houses. Other protestors ran towards a mosque to hide. Some residents watched the scene from the windows of their houses. Others shut the windows and watched through the chinks.

Sridar and his friends, Rahul and Anil, were returning from the Shankaracharya temple when they found themselves caught in heavy stone pelting and crossfire. Sridar wore a red jacket. When the three boys saw an armoured vehicle come close to them, they ran in different directions. A small group of youths ran alongside Sridar and yelled abuses at the policemen. From a distance, the police fired a teargas shell. Smoke engulfed the place. An old man fell down while running towards a safe corner. Many young men started shouting pro-azadi slogans. Sridar did not know what to do.

A young man shouted, 'Pick up the stones and hurl at the motherfuckers.' In frenzy, Sridar picked up a piece of brick lying on the road and hurled it towards the sky. The next moment, Sridar saw an armed soldier yell, 'The man in the red jacket. Shoot him!' A Muslim protestor standing next to Sridar asked him to run and hide. He ran tirelessly until he found himself out of breath in the courtyard of a Muslim house. He hid in the lavatory adjacent to the main door. An old woman saw him look terrified and pulled him by his sleeve towards herself, and asked him to hide in the cellar.

The next day's morning newspapers carried a heart-wrenching account of the massacre at the Zero Bridge. Many had died including a boy of twelve years. They were buried in the Freedom Graveyard at Elahpur.

Sridar's mother discovered a discarded bullet in the pocket of his jacket. She shouted at Sridar and asked for an explanation.

'I picked it up yesterday from the roadside. Just to add to my treasure,' he stammered.

His mother slapped him and then broke down in tears. She hurled the bullet from the window.

Over the next few days, no one from the family roamed in the streets. Every day the militant outfits gave a call for *hartal* – a complete shutdown of the city. Shops remained shut. People kept away from work. Even the *gojar* labourers did not assemble at the Nawa Kadal Chowk for people to fetch them for labour.

Sridar kept indoors and spent most of the time in his room, dusting his books and trying to fill the pages of his diary. His mother kept the windows of their house shut for most parts of the day. They listened to the sound of the raging gunfire emanating from the streets at Nalla-e-Maer. Every day the sounds became louder and louder, indicating that the militants and the forces were inching closer to the houses in the locality.

Sridar got used to the sound of bullets being fired.

'Different guns make different sounds while firing,' he boasted to his mother.

The names of towns and streets were changed to reinforce a new cultural identity. Green was decreed to be the colour for all signboards of the shops and commercial establishments. The time in all the watches and clocks was turned backwards by half an hour. Pamphleteering became an obsession. New militant organisations put posters all over the city announcing their mission. The posters carried warnings against those suspected to be harmful to their cause and the movement.

Sridar no longer looked forward to accompany his grandfather to Yarbhal to buy rations. One day when Mahanandju went to collect his renewed ration card from the ration ghat, he saw the street deserted.

'Is it a holiday today?' he wondered when he saw no one at the ration ghat.

'*Namaskar! Waray chiv?*' Janaki Nath whispered frightfully from the window of his house, which overlooked the doongas in Yarbhal.

Mahanandju was taken aback at hearing his neighbour talk somewhat fearfully.

'*Waray chus* Janaki Nath! What is the matter with the ration ghat today? Where has everybody vanished? Have the demons descended here?' Mahanandju asked.

'Come inside, I have something to tell you,' Janaki Nath said as he shut the window.

Mahanandju opened the door, and ascended the flight of stairs, and entered Janaki Nath's living room. He sat down near the window.

'Mahanandju, early this morning at Yarbhal, a haenz girl drowned herself to death in the river,' Janaki Nath began. 'No one knows the truth. One woman told us that the girl's father was taken away last night by two strangers. When he returned home in the morning, he found his daughter gone. Her body was found entangled in the weeds.'

'What do the people say?' Mahanandju asked.

'Everyone has his own version. When the girl's father returned and entered his doonga, he screamed, "Rape . . . murder." We saw him run amuck from his doonga towards the ration ghat at Yarbhal, belching at the security forces.'

That evening rumours started floating. Some said that she was raped by a soldier and then murdered. Others said that she committed suicide after being raped.

'They raped her and then murdered her, destroyers of our women and girls; the occupants of our land! They will rape your girls and women too, and then murder them and throw them into the river, murderers and . . .' the boatman was heard saying to the neighbours.

A day later, Bashir Dar, one of Mahanandju's patients narrated another version of the incident to Mahanandju to persuade him to leave Kashmir and also convince other Pandit families in the neighbourhood to leave their homes. Bashir Dar was a militant, who had contacts with many local politicians. He told Mahanandju that he knew the truth.

Before the girl's murder, a haenz woman had seen two youths argue with the girl's father at Yarbal. They had forced the father of the haenz girl to accompany them in a minivan shortly after dinner time. He was taken away and released only the next morning. Soon after midnight, some shrieks were heard and the haenz woman who lived in the doonga had seen a tall man, draped in a blanket, leave the doonga and run towards the end of the road.

'Mahanandju, the man who entered the doonga around midnight, after the girl's father was whisked away by two strangers, was an Afghan,' Dar narrated. 'The next morning the girl told her father about the Afghan who had entered the doonga at night. Upon hearing what the Afghan had done the girl's father strangled her and pushed her body from the window of the doonga into the waters of the Jhelum.'

'How can a father kill his own daughter?' Mahanandju shuddered in disbelief.

'These Afghans are helping us in our struggle for freedom. They have vast experience in fighting for liberation in their own land, and have come here to teach us the *jihad*. They too deserve a night of passion sometimes,' Dar said.

Mahanandju wiped the beads of perspiration from his brow. He could not help think about the helpless plight of the haenz girl at the lust of the Afghan.

Dar continued to reveal the horrid truth, stoically and dispassionately.

'The supreme sacrifice of the boatman and his daughter did not go unrewarded. He was given his compensation. Our boys are indeed merciful and compassionate.'



Every day brought more deaths and more disappearances in Mahanandju's locality. Days progressed somewhat fast. Some days were quiet, while others were marred with incidents of stone pelting and crossfire between the forces and the militants. The Pandits kept the windows of their houses permanently shut. They were scared to venture out on the roads. The Pandit women stopped putting *tilaks* on their foreheads to mask their identity. The men grew beards. They did not speak to one another on the streets. They abandoned their traditional greeting 'Namaskar'.

A tonga stopped near Mahanandju's house early in the morning. Gunatoth and Gunawati got down from it. Sridar was still asleep when they arrived at Mahanandju's house. They seemed to have lost their voices. Sridar woke to Gunawati's sobbing in the corridor. Gunawati narrated a horrifying account of the killing of a Pandit family at Mulla.

The last seven Pandit families at Mattan fled their homes out of fear and terror after Leelawati, a doctor, who practised at a clinic, was found dead one morning. The news on the radio did not give the details of her death. Dr Leelawati had paid the price for not obeying the diktat of the militants. The militants had sent a letter to her, threatening her with dire consequences if she charged any fee for treating the injured militants. Leelawati's consultation fees were very reasonable. Even the poor could afford treatment at her clinic. She had ignored the warning, but paid a visit to the house of the militant and met his mother, who assured Leelawati that no harm would come to her. 'Do not worry Doctor Sahiba! I will talk to my son. He is a bit wayward, but means no harm.'

'Gowri, we woke to a horrifying sight the day before yesterday. A worker at the Mattan Lumber Bazaar saw bits of mangled remains of a body tied around a chainsaw. Some yards away, the body of Leelawati's husband was found tied to a poplar tree. It had bullet marks in the neck and the temple,' Gunawati narrated.

'Next morning the other Pandit families in Mattan started evacuating their homes,' Gunatoth said. 'The decree clearly stated that the Pandits leave. The posters on the walls of Pandit houses read: "All non-believers and informers are given thirty-six hours to leave this place. Those who fail to obey will be sawed."

There was no one left in the village to cremate the bodies of Dr Leelawati and her husband. In Srinagar, people heard that their bodies were cremated by the Muslim neighbours. The mother of the militant had arranged for the cremation with the help of a Pandit priest from a nearby village.

Gunatoth and Gunawati had left most of the household belongings at their home and called for a tonga to take them to Srinagar. They were the last of the seven Pandit families at Mattan who abandoned their house in fear and terror, and fled the village in the morning to escape death. A bunch of keys, a brass tumbler and gold ornaments were all they carried with them.

A day later, the old couple left Kashmir.

The streets wore a deserted look. The authorities lifted the curfew to allow for burials. Lasa sat at the window of his room smoking a cigarette. From his room he saw the Nalla-e-Maer road, the Eidgah and some houses of the Tibetan settlement. One moment, his mind was blank. The other moment, he thought of his friend Amarnath.

The day before, Lasa and Sridar had attended the cremation of Amarnath. The cremation was attended by some of Amarnath's friends and close relatives. Amarnath had often expressed admiration for Sridar's love of books and his writings. He had read one of Sridar's essays 'Crying is Beautiful'.

'How well the boy writes, Lasa!' Amarnath had marvelled. 'I wish I could write such lovely prose.'

On their way back home, Lasa and Sridar had seen many posters glued to the walls, lamp posts, and the doors of some Pandit houses.

Each one of them read: 'Pandits, leave Kashmir or perish forever.'

Amarnath was shot at by two unidentified youths at the crack of the dawn, while returning home from a temple. He was two steps from his house when he realised he had been shot at. Two bullets into his ribs! He was skinny and frail. He took a couple of deep breaths and died. His wife fainted when she

heard the news. Amarnath had retired as a lecturer of history ten years back. After his retirement, he spent most of the days reading newspapers and writing letters to his son and daughter-in-law, who lived in the US. Both were doctors. Amarnath was a collector of books and old manuscripts. His personal library at his home housed some rare books on theology and history. He had inherited this treasure from his father.

Amarnath's cremation was attended by some of his students as well. Many of them knew the militant outfits operating in the locality. After the cremation, they went to his house to pay their condolences to his wife.

'Why Amarnath? What did he do?' she asked one of his students, who spoke highly of him and praised him as a noble person.

'He should not have been killed. His name was not in the hit list. I checked. It is a mistake. Maybe, some boys from a different outfit did this. May God forgive them!' the man said.

'And what did others do to get killed?' another Pandit asked.

'Some people have to die. Otherwise, we won't be taken seriously. They are killing Muslims also. It is a price which has to be paid. Many more will die in the struggle.'

'Bitta Karate has declared that he is willing to slit even his own mother's throat if she came in his way,' the Pandit said.

Amarnath's wife remembered her husband as a man of few needs. 'Reading newspapers and having tea! This is how he used to spend his days after retirement,' she said to his friends and students. 'We should have gone to the US to be with our son.'

One night in January, the Pandits heard the slogans broadcast through loudspeakers from the mosques.

'O informers, agents and *kafirs*, leave this land. Leave Kashmir, leave Kashmir.'

With each passing hour in the night, the slogans grew louder and louder.

With nightfall, the minarets resounded with new slogans. 'Pandits must leave. Freedom is ours! The land must be purified!'

A feeling of terror gripped the Pandit families at Yarbala. No one knew what to do.

With each day, Lasa became restless. Sleep fled him. He spent the nights awake, doing nothing except watching the hands of the clock move from one hour to the other. Curfew prevented him from meeting Ali and his other friends. He dreaded staying at home all day. He dreaded stepping out in the street.

One morning Lasa entered Razaq's house to get his television repaired by Razaq's son Jana, who was a mechanic. The family respected Lasa. When Razaq saw Lasa, he became tense. He opened the window of the room and shouted, 'Is the search going anywhere? We Muslims are being killed. Damn India, damn Indian dogs. We want azadi. I hate India.'

Razaq closed the door.

'Pandit Sahib, you are my brother. I was simply acting. The boys are on the street. I am safe now,' he said to Lasa.

When Lasa left, Razaq felt relieved and shouted loudly, 'Pandit Sahib, your fifty rupees are with me now.'

Lasa heard Razaq say to the boys, 'I have robbed this Pandit of fifty rupees.'

His acting was perfect.

Sridhar had not met his friends Rahul and Anil for many days. He remembered Rahul's words that he wanted to flee to Bombay to become an actor.

. 'I will run away to Bombay and struggle there, till I realise my dream. Acting is my dream. One day you will see me act in a film.

Sridar preserved a photo of all three of them wearing sunglasses. He looked at the picture and remembered the day when they had played truant at school and watched a movie in the Broadway cinema. Upon returning from the show, they went to the photo studio near their school at Karan Nagar to take a picture.

Sridar missed Rahul and Anil. There was no news from them.

One morning, the news of the death of a young militant woke everyone up quite early. There was mayhem in the streets. A man made repeated announcements from the mosque that the martyr would find his due place in paradise.

'God, give us more sons like him, so that they can sacrifice their lives for freedom and glory,' a woman wailed. She held a picture of the hero close to her chest.

In the night a mosque was razed to ashes. The army had laid an ambush for the armed militants, who had used the mosque as a hideout. The people waited for the gun battle to end, and for the news of the hero who had risked his life for the sake of freedom. Freedom was everything they had lived for. Nothing else existed and mattered. Freedom was the only word on the lips of people.

'Brothers, prepare for the grand funeral,' a bearded man said. 'One death will create a thousand more heroes. The world will see them emerge victorious. Bring our children out from the confines of the houses. Bring them on to the roads and let them see their hero for the last time. Let them see what it is to live.'

A man held a gun in his hands and fired in the air.

Lasa and his family watched from the window. Preparations were underway for the funeral. Everyone seemed to be ready for their turn to encounter the inevitable, and be crowned a hero.

A young Muslim boy, who lived in the house adjacent to Lasa's, held a green flag in his hand and fluttered it vehemently through the window of his house. Seeing the protest raging across the neighbourhood, he joined his father in shouting slogans.

'How will it be father, if I die with a bullet in my chest. How will it be when I bleed slowly? Will I feel any pain? I am scared father, but I wish to be brave and courageous in my death. Will I be forgotten after I die or remembered as a martyr?' he asked.

'Azadi . . . azadi . . . ' the protestors sang.

When the boy's mother heard him shout slogans and sing of martyrdom, she shouted, 'May God protect you and destroy the enemy.'

In the evening, the news of the militant's death proved to be false. He had escaped with bullet injuries. When the news reached his mother, she cried overjoyed with a sense of disbelief. The news of her son's death had made her brave, but the news of his being alive made her cry. There were celebrations in the locality. The Pandits watched the scene in terror. They were mere terrified spectators.

Lasa's neighbour visited his house. He could not hide his fear and covered his face with the sleeve of his pheran.

'Did you hear that Zaina Kadal is on fire? They may set fire to the other bridges over Jhelum, so that the military convoys don't enter downtown,' he blabbered.

He saw Ali at Lasa's house and made a sullen face, disapproving of Lasa's friendship with Ali. Ali had come to pay a visit and join the family for the evening tea.

Ali joked with Lasa that the Pandits would have to join the freedom movement.

'You are with us, aren't you?' Ali said and winked at Lasa.

After Ali left later that evening, the neighbour warned Lasa to keep away from the Muslims and not to confide in them anymore.

'The final hour has come,' the neighbour said trembling. 'We are not safe here anymore. The situation is deteriorating rapidly. We must not stay here any longer. Muslims can't be trusted now. They are ready to sacrifice their sons. Ali can't protect you Lasa.'

'Who else can we trust?' Lasa said.

The neighbour pleaded Lasa to take things seriously.

'Do not pretend to be brave Lasa. Tomorrow is what we need to be fearful of. There is some mischief lurking in the Muslims, who claim to be our well-wishers. They will see us murdered if we do not leave,' the neighbour cautioned.

'Whatever has to happen will happen,' Lasa said to his neighbour. 'This hysteria will not last long. We need to hold on to ourselves and wait for the situation to improve.'

'The situation will not improve. A secret message has come to the Pandits to leave Kashmir. Nobody can guarantee our safety and security any longer. We have been promised safety in Jammu.'

'How can we leave just like that? Where will we go?' Lasa asked.

'Lasa, last night I dreamt that I was dead, killed by a bullet while walking on the bridge. I saw my own dead body floating

in the river. I saw my mother petrified at the ghastly sight. She kept telling herself that she would not cry and mourn,' the neighbour narrated.

'It is only a dream. Let us not be cowards,' Lasa said.

'We are cowards. It is better to be a coward and hide than perish at the hands of militants. After all, we have nothing to do with the Muslims and their inane struggle for the liberation of Kashmir. I cannot ignore my foreboding dream. I have decided to leave.'

Later that night, Lasa's wife advised him to take heed of the neighbour's words.

'Everyone is saying that we should leave,' she said to Lasa. 'I don't feel safe at all in our own street. Our Muslim neighbours have started behaving strangely towards us. Why is this happening?'

'You must neglect these antics of bystanders,' Lasa said comforting her. 'No one will harm us.'

The next day a neighbour brought the news of the disappearance of Hira Lal from his house. His disappearance from his home early in the morning spread panic in the Pandit households in the locality. Hira Lal worked for Border Security Force (BSF) at Shiva Pora. He had gone to buy milk at Qadir Goor's shop in the morning and did not return home at all. His wife and brother waited for him till late afternoon. When Hira Lal did not return even after late evening, his brother met the neighbours in the locality to check if they had seen him. His wife froze when she got to know that her husband might have been kidnapped by some militants. His fourteen-year-old daughter wept inconsolably. By the next day, it became clear that Hira Lal had been kidnapped. His family suspected that the disappearance was to do with his employment with the Border

Security Force. There was nowhere his family could look for him. They checked with all the Pandit houses and the Muslim houses in the neighbourhood, and even in a neighbouring locality across the Nalle-e-Maer. No one had seen Hira Lal. Qadir Goor confirmed that Hira Lal had never showed up at his shop that morning.

A neighbour advised, 'We must contact Bilal and seek his help.'

Bilal knew the militants who operated in the locality.

'We need to know if Hira's kidnappers have any demands. We must convey to them that Hira is not an informer or an agent,' his brother said. He feared that the kidnappers would kill his brother, given that he worked for BSF.

Everyone in the locality talked about Hira Lal's kidnapping.

'It is not about being innocent,' a Pandit neighbour argued. 'Hira Lal was kidnapped because he is a Pandit and the militants suspected him to be an informer. For the Hizbul militants, all Pandits are informers. Besides, such kidnappings give the militants more power and confidence. They want us to fear for our lives. They want us to leave.'

Hira Lal's wife wept bitterly and waited for her husband to return. Bilal tried to establish contact with the area commander to gather information which could be of help in locating Hira's whereabouts.

The neighbours gave up hope.

'He will not return now,' the neighbour whispered timidly. 'They must have killed him and dumped his body somewhere. They will not let a BSF person go free, once they extract the information they need.' The man rubbed his hands and pretended to be brave and fearless.

'In Sopore, militants kidnapped a Pandit youth to be used as human shield while infiltrating,' someone else said.

'But everyone in our locality knew Hira Lal. They knew he was not an informer or an agent. They knew him as a pious soul, who mingled with both the Muslims and the Pandits,' mumbled another bystander.

Hira Lal returned home after two days. He arrived quietly in a ragged condition in an auto rickshaw. He looked disoriented. Upon seeing him alive in a shabby condition, his wife fainted. His brother flung his arms around him to embrace him.

Later that day a Muslim neighbour saw Hira Lal strolling in the courtyard of his house and said to him, 'You Pandit, are you afraid of us Muslims? Do you feel terrorised? Listen to me. I am afraid of my son Yaseen. He walks with strange young boys whom I have never seen. I dare not ask him who they are. At times, he doesn't come home. He sleeps with a Kalashnikov by his side. I go on telling him that I want Azadi. I worked for the Congress party here.'

Hira Lal never revealed anything to anyone. He told his neighbours that he had not been kidnapped and that he had disappeared from his house on his own volition.

A day later, Hira Lal and his family locked their house and left for Jammu. They were the first Pandit family in the locality to migrate.



The almanac, *Nechhipater*, was silent. Lasa had never understood it. Every year the family priest Madhavbooy came with a new copy of the *Nechhipater*. Every year he read the horoscopes and made predictions about the members of the family.

Lasa's family waited for Madhavbooy to bring the almanac and predict the happenings. The almanac was necessary for the family to plan the fasts and observe the rituals to be performed on the auspicious days.

Lasa heard that the priest had disappeared. Even his son was clueless. For years the young man had accompanied his father to the Pandit houses to learn the art of making predictions. Yet he never understood any of the techniques his father used and practised. When he woke up to the sudden disappearance of his father, he wanted to tear the handwritten charts his father had drawn and preserved for years.

'What good is it, if the future holds no good fortune for us?' the priest's son wondered. He knew that his father had spent days and nights worrying about his welfare. Some people from the neighbourhood had started looking at the priest with suspicion. The old man had dreamt that he was killed by his neighbour's son. In his dream, he had seen people dance merrily around his dead body. His wife laughed when he narrated the dream to her.

'You have done no wrong. You have not cheated anyone. So, why worry?' she said comforting him.

'All my predictions about prosperity and happiness are proving false. Everyone knows now. What shall I do?'

'God's will prevails,' his wife muttered. 'Be sane and don't let your dreams come true.'

Everyone in the locality was suspicious of the New Year and the horrors it would bring. No one knew if they would stay and survive in their homes till Shivratri celebrations.

Gowri had a feeling that this was the last winter for them in their house. She thought about the Gada Bhata they had

celebrated. 'May we celebrate the next Gada Bhata too in our house!' she prayed.

Lasa and his wife spent the day counting the household belongings, which they had lined up for packing in case the situation worsened in the coming days. They placed some utensils in the trunks; utensils the family had never used, but preserved for the children of their future generations. Things lay scattered in the rooms. In one room there were quilts, a mortar, a pestle and a samovar. In another one, there were books that belonged to Mahanandju and his father, and books that belonged to Lasa and Sridar. There was Mahanandju's wooden chest, the mirror, and other medical equipment used for treating the patients. There were files full of educational certificates of the family members. There were things precious and useless. The cupboards were full of clothes.

Lasa looked at the items, touched them to know if they were indeed useful. One moment, each item seemed precious. The other moment, everything seemed useless. The familiar household items scattered on the floor seemed to have lost their utility, except an old quilt in which Lasa lazed in winters. Everything useful appeared frivolous and trivial.

The night was long. Lasa heard a screeching sound made by the rusty hinges of the wooden door. The frost had made the hinges more rusty and noisy. Lasa put out the cigarette butt in the ashtray and held his breath. Some minutes later, there was another jarring sound as though someone was trying to forcibly open the main door.

'Is someone there at the door?' Lasa's wife whispered in his ear. 'Who could it be at this hour of the night?'

Lasa shook his head. His look froze.

'Nobody! Let us go to bed. It could be the wind,' Lasa said.

'Let us switch off the light of the room.'

'Why don't you peep through a chink and see if there is someone at the door?' she murmured pleading Lasa to have a look.

There was no knocking for some time. Only intermittent footfalls! It was a familiar sound of the gumboots over the snow. The hour grew tense. Lasa and his wife listened in frightful silence to the sounds.

Lasa crept to the window, his favourite place, and drew the curtain slightly, so that he could peep. There was a thin film of moisture on the windowpane. His warm breath made the pane more translucent. Slowly, he rubbed his nervous fingers on the windowpane. He bent over and looked down at the narrow lane. The light from the street lamp revealed two youths wearing pherans. One of them smoked a cigarette. He passed over the cigarette to the other fellow. He took a long drag and blew bluish grey smoke into the air. The two youths did not utter a word. They walked up and down the narrow lane. They only stopped at the gate to share the cigarette between them.

Lasa asked his wife to be silent. She tiptoed towards the window to see what was happening. One of them took a small packet out of his pocket. He took a pill out of a strip and offered it to his companion. The other youth took the pill and swallowed it.

Lasa wondered if they carried weapons under the pheran they wore. One of the youths fished out a black pistol from his pocket.

The strangers tried to open the door, but something prevented them from knocking or breaking open the door. Lasa did not

know what to do. He continued to look from the window and waited for the next move. His wife was scared and whispered to Lasa to switch on the light and scream for help. She thought that if they shouted, the neighbours would wake up and the strangers would be forced to make a hasty retreat.

Sridar was deep asleep in the other room. Lasa asked his wife to put a quilt over Sridar and ensure that the room was bolted. She peeped into Mahanandju's room and heard him snore in the room.

Lasa looked at the clock. Five more hours to dawn!

The two youths were unfamiliar to Lasa. He knew that they did not belong to the locality.

'They must have come from across Yarbali,' Lasa thought.

'What shall we do now?' Lasa's wife stuttered. 'They have guns concealed in their pherans and they swallowed pills. What for? To help them pull the trigger!'

She was impatient, restless and ran out of breath. Seeing the two youths walk past their door again and again made her heart beat faster. She turned pale as the agonising moments ticked by.

Lasa heard another spiteful knock at the door. He bit his nails.

He could not make up his mind and struggled to understand what the two youths wanted. Did they have a plan and design? Did they just want to take some drug and create fear? Did they have a target in mind? Someone else in the neighbourhood perhaps! Did they want refuge and shelter in Lasa's house for the night? Lasa wondered and imagined all possibilities. One particular possibility made Lasa shudder.

He looked at the clock once again. The muezzin's call was still hours away.

He remembered what his friends had told him. 'Lasa, we will be butchered and thrown into the Vitasta,' the words of Nilkanth echoed incessantly.

He remembered the assurances of his Muslim neighbour too: 'Do not worry. No one will touch you and your family. This is your home. This land is yours too. You are safe. I have talked to the area commander in the locality.'

The two youths whispered something into each other's ears, threw the cigarette butt on the ground, and left the street.

Lasa's wife did not sleep the whole night. Lasa fell asleep at dawn. In the morning, the footprints of the intruders had disappeared in the snow.

When Lasa woke up, he thought that he had dreamt a bad dream. The incident at night didn't seem real at all. The only thing he remembered was that the night had been unusually quiet, despite the strolling of the intruders outside the house. 'I shouldn't have slept,' he thought.

The morning was dull. Lasa felt jaded. The snow had buried everything. The courtyard was pristine white. Lasa and his wife stared at one another for a long time.

'Did it happen or was I dreaming?' he wondered. He tried to recollect the events and imagine the horror he and his wife had experienced.

Later in the day, Abdul Gani came rushing to Mahanandji's house. He listened to what had happened and didn't know what to say to Lasa and his wife. He didn't want to give an impression of helplessness. There was nothing he could do except offer advice.

'I ask you to leave because I love you,' Abdul lisped in Lasa's ears and cried.

In the evening Lasa went to meet Manzoor at Safa Kadal to pay him the last instalment of one thousand rupees for the hardware, cement and paint he had supplied for their bathroom and the living room. The bridge had been blocked by the militants to prevent the armoured vehicles from crossing into the locality. Lasa had to take a boat to cross the river.

Manzoor ran a hardware shop at Safa Kadal. He had been Lasa's student some years earlier. Manzoor's mother was full of affection for Sridar.

A week ago, Manzoor's brother was picked up by the security forces during a crackdown at Safa Kadal. People were ordered to come out of their houses and stand in a queue. Each one of the young and the old was paraded and subjected to identification checks.

Manzoor's mother became hysterical. Manzoor was full of hate for the army and the forces.

The people in the locality were afraid of stepping out of their houses. The elders feared for the safety of their children. During the prayers in the mosque, they silently exchanged greetings and carried on with their work hurriedly. They didn't share their thoughts, make idle conversations or enquire of the welfare of their families. Fear had gripped the old and the young.

When Lasa greeted Manzoor's mother, she cried bitterly.

'God will set things right,' Lasa said to her.

'All is well my dear, but crackdown will come again. Will somebody call the police to arrest crackdown? Go home dear son, and hide somewhere,' the woman blurted inconsolably.

'She has lost her mental balance,' Manzoor said. 'They dragged my brother from the house. Now they will torture him.'

After this incident, Manzoor vowed to join the militants.

'Send the children away for some days,' Lasa said. 'I pray that your brother returns soon.'

'I found a note in my brother's cupboard. It read: *Make my son a freedom fighter. Teach him the songs of freedom. Don't let him lose the remembrance of the dream for which I die,*' Manzoor confided in Lasa.

Lasa narrated the previous night's incident to Manzoor. He did not trust anyone but Manzoor. Even in the most suspicious of circumstances, Lasa's trust and faith in Manzoor would not diminish. Such was the bond they shared since Manzoor's tuition days at Lasa's home.

In the past, Manzoor and Lasa used to indulge in heated arguments about Kashmir. Manzoor wanted Kashmir to be part of Pakistan.

'Lasa, we will live in peace and happiness when Kashmir becomes part of Pakistan,' Manzoor would say.

Manzoor listened anxiously to Lasa's description of the previous night's incident. He promised Lasa that he would make enquiries and find out about the two strangers who had knocked at the door of his house the previous night.

Lasa asked Manzoor to find out if he figured in the hit list. All of a sudden Lasa started believing in the hit list, which many of his relatives and neighbours had mentioned to him.

'No harm will come to you and your family Lasa. Don't leave your home. I will die to protect your family,' Manzoor said.

Lasa lit a cigarette, took out a bundle of hundred rupee notes and thrust them into Manzoor's pocket.

'That is the last instalment Manzoor,' he said.

'Do not leave Lasa. I will talk to the area commander. You are my teacher. You will stay safe in your house.'

Lasa bid Manzoor farewell. They shook hands and did not speak much. An eternity yawned between the silences. Manzoor had a feeling that this was the last time he was speaking to Lasa.

As Lasa left the shop, Manzoor called him back. He took out the money which Lasa had slipped in his pocket.

'Lasa, you will need this money. You are my elder brother. I cannot take this money. I owe you everything. Give a hug to Sridar. I love him,' Manzoor said handing over the money to Lasa. He cried as he saw Lasa walk away from his house towards the bridge.

In the evening, Lasa told his family that they would leave in a day or two. Lasa decided to stay back for a few more days to pack the rest of the household belongings.

Gowri spent the whole evening sitting by the window of her room. She talked with Shaha and pretended to smile. She found it difficult to hide her fears. She struggled to tell her that she was leaving. Shaha had a feeling that she might not see Gowri from the next day. She wept while narrating a funny incident from the past.

Bilal's mother Fazi said in a low voice, 'Gowri, don't drink water. It has been poisoned to kill us all.'

'Three more days and Kashmir will be free!' another woman blurted from the street.

The next day other Pandit families at Yarbala deserted their houses and left for Jammu. Gowri began to have doubts about her family being able to continue living in their house for long. She knew they had no choice.

She remembered what Ismail's wife had said, 'Don't leave your house. You will live with us in Independent Kashmir.'

Gowri decided to pay a visit to Poshtu Mot to seek his blessings and ask him about what the future was to unravel.

Poshtu Mot was a Sufi saint, who lived in a cave near Aharbal. He was the son of a school teacher. He had studied till the fifth grade and had started exhibiting signs of madness. Initially, people thought that Poshtu had gone insane. But he was inclined towards spirituality and had started living the life of a recluse in a cave, near the waterfall at Aharbal. After his parents' death, he didn't come out of the cave for many months. Somehow, the local villagers started flocking to the cave and heralded him a 'Sufi'.

Since then, thousands of Pandits from different areas visited him.

No one knew Poshtu Mot's age. He seemed to have lived for years and almost three generations of Pandits remembered visiting him regularly every year, only to find him as youthful as ever. His beard was black and he always wore a white *posh*. He spoke in riddles. He danced a mad dance when inebriated or under the influence of charas, which his followers brought him.

Poshtu Mot was known to have answered many questions about the future. But only those who were masters at cracking riddles and interpreting symbols understood him.

Gowri had heard that Poshtu Mot had shifted to the house of Makhanlal Dhar, near Nawa Kadal. She entered Dhar's house and sat down in front of Poshtu Mot. He sat cross-legged near the window and looked at the dark waters of the Jhelum flow by the row of old houses.

Some Pandits, who were his followers, sat quietly in the room. A yellow flame flickered in a lantern and lit the room. Gowri waited anxiously for Poshtu Mot's disciple to make

a sign, so that she could speak to him. Finally, someone in the room asked Gowri to speak. She mustered courage to ask the question she wanted to ask.

'What will happen to us?' Gowri asked.

Mot continued to look at the river from the window. Then, he laughed.

'What will happen to us? What will happen to us?' Poshtu Mot repeated the question mockingly.

Gowri didn't understand Poshtu Mot's laughter. She tried to understand why he had repeated the question she had asked him.

'Say something please. Lead us to the right path. What should we do?' another Pandit asked.

Poshtu Mot became serious. He took a long drag on his cigarette and reclined against the cushion.

'Years from now, the children of your children will return and plant saplings in the backyard of their old houses. Go home now and sleep through the dark nights.'

'Bless us all! Pray for us,' Gowri said.

Mot raised his hands and clapped. Then, he said loudly, 'Sing happy songs and let your thoughts dance. Glory will be ours. Victory will be ours.'

A devotee, who waited in the room, asked Gowri to offer a *niyaz* at the shrine at Reshipeer. 'Everything will be alright,' he said to Gowri and other Pandits at the temple.

Gowri left. She knew that they would have to leave. But she prayed that everyone would return soon.

In the afternoon, Gowri wanted to go to Batayaar to offer a *niyaz* one last time at Reshipeer's shrine. She heard that the shrine had been abandoned and no one stayed behind. She knew that Mahantaji and Lasa would follow her to go that

far alone. A hartal had been announced. The road leading to Batayaar was no longer safe. There were bunkers alongside the road. The windows of the houses by the roadside remained permanently shut. The militants aimed their fire at the unknown faces watching behind the sandbag bunkers. Elsewhere on the endless road, many sandbag bunkers were being erected by the army personnel. Protestors hid in narrow lanes and hurled stones at the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) personnel. Bullets were fired from roof-tops. The CRPF personnel fired teargas shells to disperse the crowd. Sometimes, a bystander was singled and shot at.

The days were fraught with uncertainty. It was difficult to predict when the curfew would be imposed or lifted. If curfew proved ineffective, the authorities announced shoot-at-sight orders. Anything could happen.

Gowri's anxiousness made her superstitious. She was not afraid of going out alone. She had always been a bold woman like her mother-in-law. She kept on thinking about her inability to pay a visit to the shrine to offer a niyaz and prayed for the well-being of the family.

The next day many Pandit families in the locality deserted their houses and left quietly at dawn. Some carried the household belongings, leaving no traces behind. Others left everything untouched in their homes carrying a hope to return soon.

Gowri prepared to leave too.



The leaving was inevitable. There was no other choice. Last
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didn't want to take any more chances with his family in such

circumstances. Though there were assurances from the Muslim neighbours that no harm would come to Lasa's family, there was fear which told him to send his family off to Jammu.

Lasa felt miserable. There was no one to talk to. Pandits feared for their lives and saw to it that nobody came to know about their silent exit. Mahanandju could not sleep that night. He put his personal belongings in a trunk. Lasa's wife kept the essential belongings in some trunks and readied for leaving. Gowri cried the whole night in the living room. She looked at the newly installed water heater and the new tiles in the bathroom.

'Can't we take the tiles? Can't we take the new ceiling?' she said to her son, as she looked at the tiles and the ceiling. They had spent a lot of money on the renovation of the house. She had planned to invite her relatives for some days. She forgot that her relatives had abandoned their own houses and left for Jammu.

Bilal's father sent a tonga early in the morning. Mahanandju, Gowri, Sridar and his mother boarded the tonga, and set out for the Tourist Reception Centre from where they were to board a bus to Jammu. This was the first time in his entire life that Mahanandju would cross the Banihal tunnel on the Srinagar - Jammu highway.

Lasa promised to bring along the rest of the household items in some days. That cold morning many Pandit families left their homes. Their present fear and a sense of horror kept them from imagining the horror of what was to come and become of them elsewhere. The fleeing Pandits did not know what they were doing.

There was no time for goodbyes and farewells. Mahanandju did not meet any of his friends on the day of his departure

from home. He thought of meeting Juma Saecz. But there was no time. He felt helpless at not being able to stay longer in his house. It was still grey in the morning when they left. Gowri wanted to go back and have a last look at the house. Sridar longed for one last look at Nusrat! He longed to whisper 'goodbye' in her ear. The tonga sped into a distance. Tota's laughter faded away in the distant silences.

The waters of the Jhelum flowed quietly under the bridges.

Some men pasted new posters on the walls and the lamp posts, announcing an ultimatum to the Pandits who were yet to leave. Mahanandju felt relieved that they had met the deadline set by the militant groups for the departure of Pandits.

'How shocking that Gani did not reveal the truth to me! I still remember the dream,' Mahanandju said to Gowri.

The tonga reached the Tourist Reception Centre, and they boarded a bus for Jammu.

In a few days, Lasa too was to leave. Every Pandit family in the locality was to leave. No one would stay behind. For hundreds of years the Pandits had lived peacefully in Kashmir.

The street near the Pandit bakery was deserted. Till recently the street used to be full of Pandits sauntering busily and buying lavasas. Even the baker had fled the locality. Shambu Nath, the tobacconist, had stopped coming to his shop. No one had heard from him.

Lasa started packing up. Without his wife and mother he was indecisive and morose. He had not heard from them. But he imagined them safe in Jammu. He had no relatives or friends at Jammu with whom his family could stay.

Gani and Shaha asked Lasa to join them at their place in the evening. Lasa was surprised to see an old Pandit couple

at Gani's house. They kept themselves close to the kangris for warmth. Lasa recognised the old couple instantly. They were the parents of Ramju and Maharaj Kaul. Ramju worked in the office of the Accountant General at Srinagar, and Maharaj was a clerk at a bank near the Dal Gate. The old couple lived on the third floor of their house at Yarbala.

Gani winked at Lasa and led him upstairs in another room.

'What are they doing here Gani?' Lasa asked.

'Ramju and Maharaj left in the morning. They took away everything from their house, except an old quilt. They left the old couple behind. Pandit Kaul and his wife knocked at our door in the afternoon and asked for kangris. They narrated the story to us. They don't even have food. No charcoal for the kangris too! Only a few warm clothes in their trunk. Their sons! How could they do this to their parents?'

Lasa was horrified to hear this. He did not know what to say to the old couple. Their eyes betrayed affection for their children. The old man mumbled prayers for the well-being of everyone, while his wife sat silently in a corner with her eyes closed. Her hands shivered. Lasa and Gani heard them say softly to Shaha that good sense would prevail soon and their sons would return in the evening to take them along.

'They have not spoken a word of this to anyone but us. The man's wife still thinks that her sons and daughters-in-law are going to return in the evening to take them along. Lasa, they may not feel safe here for long. Will you take them along when you leave for Jammu? You can help them board a bus bound for Jammu,' Gani pleaded.

Lasa nodded and shuddered to think of the night
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'Till then, they will stay with us. Shaha and I will look after them,' Gani assured. He felt relieved that Lasa had agreed to take the old couple with him.

Ali came to see Lasa off in the morning of 24 January 1990.

'Give my regards to your wife. I will miss her hospitality,' Lasa said.

'How will we live Lasa? What will become of us?'

Ali presented a book of Rumi's verses to Lasa. Both Ali and Lasa were ardent admirers of Rumi's poetry and used to recite Rumi's verses during their conversations. Life for them was a series of long walks and happy conversations about books they had read and planned to read in the coming season.

Ali knew that the day of Lasa's departure from Kashmir would spell the end of something which was indefinable. He did not want to think about the days ahead; days without Lasa and his family around in the neighbourhood. He did not want to think how scared he was of the impending loneliness and a life without his friend. The only comforting thought was that of the freedom struggle and the hope of seeing Kashmir liberated. He hoped that Lasa would return soon.

Lasa's grandfather and Ali's grandfather had been friends for many years in their youth. Ali's grandfather had spent a lifetime teaching Persian at the University, and was a well known Persian scholar. He had written books on Persian mystics and poets. He was also a fervent supporter of Kashmir's freedom struggle. 'India' for him stood for oppression and imperialism. He recalled anecdotes from history in which the sentiments and aspirations of Kashmiri people were crushed by the successive governments in India. He had died in his nineties due to acute breathlessness, while returning from a mosque on a hot summer's day. Ali had grown up in an academic environment.

'Lasa, Muslims are safe in Kashmir so long as the Pandits live here. Once the Pandits leave, the Indian forces will kill us,' Ali said.

'There is no conspiracy Ali,' Lasa said. 'I hope to return soon. We cannot live outside our homes for long.'

'God be with you brother,' Ali said and bid Lasa farewell.

Lasa inspected the rooms in his house one last time. He entered his room knowing that this was the last day in his room. The room was empty. Some clothes lay on the floor. He drew the curtains and shut the cupboard. He locked Mahanandju's room, which was adjacent to his. He looked at the cupboard containing old books that belonged to his grandfather and hoped that there would be a time to salvage them. Lasa locked his house and put the keys in his pocket. It was an iron lock, which they had not used for many years.

Even while boarding the truck, he did not want to leave.

The trunks he had taken along contained books, utensils, clothes, files and documents. He dropped the old couple at the Tourist Reception Centre and bought them two tickets for the bus journey to Jammu.

The night earlier was the most traumatic night of Lasa's entire life. He missed his wife. He was not able to decide which things to pack and take with him, and which things to leave behind. The household items lay unattended to and scattered in the rooms. The ones which were his prized possessions disappeared behind the dark corners. As he looked at the things, he was not sure of their utility. His mother and wife had carefully put the household belongings in the trunks. He opened those trunks, looked at them and wondered if the things held any value at all. He decided to take those things along anyway.

Lasa thought about the house he left behind; the house in which his grandfather and father were born; the house in which he had first made love to his wife; the house in which his son was born.

He saw his house fade away in a distance. He wondered if he had taken all the belongings. He wondered if he had left something behind. His soul refused to leave the house.

As soon as the truck reached Qazigund, the winter mist seemed to vanish. The announcements faded too. 'Glory to us . . . to the martyrs, to those who die for the motherland, and to freedom. . . .'

The sky became clearer, and Lasa saw the sun come out for the first time in many days. The rays of the sun bathed the snow yellow in the barren fields. All buses to Jammu stopped at Qazigund for the passengers to have tea. During the earlier years he remembered stopping by this place on his way to Delhi and smiling at tourists, who stopped to take home souvenirs to be hung on the walls of their houses.

The scene at Qazigund was chaotic and noisy. Trucks were lined up on the road. Old men and women were dazed. Infants and children were asleep in the laps of their mothers. The young men were busy fetching the tea and eats for their elders.

Lasa was bewildered at the strangeness of it all. There were Pandit families from different towns and villages in Kashmir. Some people talked in hushed tones and some were speechless as though they had lost their voices. Others talked as though they were speaking for the first time after a long spell of silence. Lasa noticed that there was a sense of abandonment among the Pandits.

Each truck carried a home, and hopelessness. Each truck trudged on inexorably with terror-stricken faces looking pitifully all around.

There were some who had left without informing their brothers. Qazigund was a place which united brothers and cousins, who had spent years living separately due to family feuds. Brothers and cousins who didn't talk to one another in their homes embraced when they met at Qazigund. It was a strange feeling of horror, consolation and grief, which united brothers who hadn't talked for years. A sense of homelessness ignited their hearts with love for one another. A sense of loss made them embrace each other and seek solace in grief. Each one had a story to narrate. They narrated stories of the last few days in their homes to others, whom they had never known.

The old men and women looked confused. For many, it was the first time that they had stepped out of their villages. Some had never even travelled out of Kashmir before in their lives. They did not know if they would survive the long journey through the meandering highway.

'Where does this road lead to?' an old Pandit asked his son.

'Where are we going my son?' another old man standing nearby asked. He had a strange look on his face. It was the look of a lost man.

'Are you listening? I don't want to cross the Banihal tunnel. Can we turn back? Why can't you leave me here to my fate,' another said to his wife, desperate and fearful that he had lost his room.

An old man descended from the stairs of a nearby mosque and cried out aloud to the Pandits, who alighted helplessly on to the trucks to resume their journey towards an alien destination.

'Pandits, do not leave your motherland. It is a conspiracy by our enemy to separate brother from brother. We will all be slaughtered like sheep now. It will rain bullets on innocent

Muslims. Jhelum will turn red with the blood of your brothers. Please, listen to me. I speak from my soul. Pandits, do not leave this place. Without you, how will we exist?' he pleaded.

'The Hindu Governor has asked them to leave this place. He is the real villain,' another Muslim shouted from the street as he watched the scene unfold.

'Islam does not teach violence. It is not right to torture the innocents,' the old man howled.

A young Muslim bystander climbed the steps of the mosque and slapped the old man.

'You don't deserve to live old man. Shut up before I lose my patience!' he bellowed indignantly.

'My God! What has become of us?' the old man ranted.

'Let the Pandit men leave Kashmir, but let them leave their women behind,' the young man growled. He laughed.

'Young man, I don't want to argue with you. Someday you will realise your mistake,' the old man lamented and disappeared into the mosque.

Lasa lit a cigarette and boarded the truck. For long he looked at the road and the mountains. As the truck crossed the Banihal tunnel, Lasa closed his eyes and fell asleep.

He awoke to a jarring sound the truck made while manoeuvring a sharp turn on the highway. He realised that he had dreamed a dream. He remembered the images and the sounds in the dream. Everything was so vivid, so lifelike and so sensory. In his dream, he rode a horse on the edge of a distant mountain. He saw a gojar girl laughing at the smiling Yamberzak. He saw her run from her flock towards the frothy waters of a distant brook, which ran noisily in a serene cornfield. He saw abandoned gojar dwellings on a slope of a mountain. The horse stopped and Lasa sat down in one of the dwellings and went to

sleep. It was a dream in a dream. There were some reflections of his grandfather and some shadows of his childhood. In the dream he dreamt that he ran alongside a fast-flowing river. And he woke to find himself in yet another dream. He heard the girl laugh and saw her pluck a Yamberzal. She smiled at Lasa and then disappeared along with the Yamberzal.

The truck driver offered him a cigarette. He accepted it, lit it, and started to recollect the dream. Everything was so vivid and spectacular. He felt as though he had touched the river and the Yamberzals.

From the window of the truck, he gazed at the fleeting trees and the mountain peaks. His fatigue vanished. As the evening crouched in on the highway that snaked around the mountain range, silence descended. The snow-capped mountains fast disappeared from behind the horizon. The mountains ahead were barren. The river that ran alongside the truck sang a different song.

Lasa looked at the clock in the truck and thought about the times ahead and what was to come. He wondered if he was to return to his home. Could he ever reconcile with a new beginning? Was it just an end or a new beginning?

'This parting is temporary. This can't be forever,' he thought.

It had been the longest day of Lasa's life. The day had made him weary.

A gentle breeze whistled past as the truck stopped at a highway dhaba. Beyond the limpid horizon the sun began to set. A milestone at the edge of the road on the highway read 'JAMMU - 79 KILOMETRES'.

Two



The past was too beautiful to be left behind. The past evoked a longing to be re-lived. The past aspired to race past the present and the future. The present was just a crippled memory, a child's play, a bubble.

Lasa disembarked at the pavement where the highway ended and merged with the road. His truck was greeted by a swarm of Pandits on a road of Jammu. Some of the residents and the local shopkeepers gaped pitifully at the maddening chaos of trucks that halted on the road. It was hard for Lasa to see the local residents watching the Pandits, and Pandits watching other Pandits as though they were examining one another and searching for some answers. The people of this town, where people spoke a different language and house bore a different identity, watched the homeless Pandits arrive with dull amazement.

At a distance, innumerable trucks carrying Pandit families draped the highway. The pavements on the roadside bustled with

chaotic activity. Labourers and porters emerged, thronged the pavements, and fought with one another to be the first ones to carry the household belongings and luggage of the Pandits.

One labourer shouted, 'Ten rupees to the temple and forty rupees to the camp.'

'Kashmiri tea and lavasas for two rupees,' an errand boy screamed from a roadside tea shop.

Some mendicants flocked the area looking for lost items. Nearby, a squabble broke out among minibus drivers and the truck conductors for causing traffic havoc on the road. Some hawkers got their handcarts closer to the trucks and buses. Crowds of people jostled around.

Lasa was aghast at the chaos and madness that had erupted on the roadside.

'The houses here seem to have lost their roofs,' an old man said to his wife, seeing that the houses didn't have the tin roofs like the ones in Kashmir.

There were Pandits everywhere, searching for their relatives, neighbours, friends and others.

A middle-aged man thrust his head out from the window of a truck and asked, 'Is this the final destination? Do we get down here?'

A batch of Pandits that had arrived days earlier assembled to supply the fresh arrivals water, tea and some bread wrapped in old newspapers. There were other youths who tried to give order to the descending chaos. Everyone was directionless and dazed.

Nearby, distraught Pandit men and women searched frantically for the latest information on the situation in Kashmir. They swarmed the arriving trucks and looked for familiar faces of those who spoke in familiar dialects in order to ascertain the

names of the towns and villages they came from. Some were more interested in knowing how many Pandits were still left behind, helpless and trapped in their homes in Kashmir.

There were the old men and women who asked the same questions to the new arrivals every day, 'How many Pandits were slaughtered today, yesterday, and the day before? How many temples razed to the ground? How many helpless families are left behind?'

The Pandits who received the new entrants had stories to narrate. And those who arrived every evening had stories to tell.

Lasa was not able to make up his mind whether such an act of mass migration was a sign of cowardice or great strength and courage. Even years later, he would not be able to fathom the depth of the wounds the migration inflicted on a generation.

'Children will face difficulties in these unfamiliar surroundings. How will the old, who have never stepped out of their houses in a lifetime, survive here?' he wondered.

He was told that the state government authorities were available for help in the camps that were being set up for the Pandits. Many government schools and buildings had been converted into camps for them.

'Register your family immediately,' someone advised Lasa.

He lit a cigarette and tried to look for some people he knew.

He kept on walking alongside the road till he reached a building where he spotted some familiar faces. He was greeted by acquaintances from his locality, who agreed to escort him to a government school that had been converted into a camp. When they reached the compound of the school, they offered help.

In the school compound children ran from one end to the other, amid shrieks and the loud din created by the people. It was a mad frenzy. While the men haggled with hawkers, the women washed utensils in the greyish waters of a canal. An old Dogra woman witnessed the unfolding of events from the window of her house, unmoved.

Lasa tried to come to terms with the ugly reality, accept the horrifying beginning, and resign to the inevitable. He saw that the Pandits had already started attending to the basic needs in order to survive, and was reassured of his own will to hold on to the strings of his life. In the new city the children found themselves despicably enticed to the new surroundings.

As Lasa entered a vacant room, he saw an old Pandit woman near a stove. She was cooking rice for dinner. She spread a piece of cloth in front of her husband, who sat quietly in a corner. Later when she placed a thali in front of him, he held a morsel of rice in his hand for a long time, unable to reach it to his mouth. He stared at the wall for long and a drop of tear hung precariously on his cheek.

Lasa spent the night in the dusty room of the government school and expected to meet his family the next day. The night was warm, the air bitter. As night fell, he thought about the announcements broadcast aloud from the mosques in Kashmir. For days he had listened to the announcements, which had kept the people awake in fear.

A broken wooden table stood on three legs next to the old mattress which Lasa spread on the floor to sleep on. Overcome with lassitude, he fell asleep quite soon. It was a dreamless sleep.

The next morning he woke up to a pall of thick smoke which entered the room from the door. He woke up parched

and realised that he had been thirsty the whole night. In the night he could neither locate a water bottle nor a tap from which he could drink some water. The ceiling fan was caught in a myriad of cobwebs. Spiders dangled from the fine threads and waited for their catch. Lasa's household belongings were in the trunks, baskets and wooden boxes. He had left his father's wooden chest at home.

He spent some time looking at the ceiling, thinking about what to do next. He felt too lazy to get up and explore the surroundings.

'What is the point of waking up?' he thought. 'What is to be done with the cruel day?'

He didn't want to know what had happened and what had made them leave their house. He thought about his grandfather's books he had left behind. He had forgotten to take them along with him. The books were kept on an old mahogany bookcase in the attic. Lasa knew that his mother never saw any value in the books and old journals his grandfather had so well preserved. 'I hope I can go back and bring them here,' he thought.

A woman from the adjacent room greeted him. A child in the room was playing with a toy. The woman's father-in-law sang a lullaby and broke down, not able to recollect the lines.

'Thank God, the Governor saved us. He is our saviour. Otherwise, we would all have perished in our homes,' the man blabbered.

'You seem to be from the city,' the woman said. 'Where is your family? Are they alright?'

'They are somewhere in a camp. We are from Khankah-i-Sokhta in Srinagar. Our house is next to Yarbali,' Lasa said. 'Which village are you from?'

'We are from Burzahom. Will you have some tea?' the woman said softly to Lasa, as she boiled some water on the stove. 'We are ruined. What shall we do now?' she sobbed.

The makeshift kitchens assiduously set up by the Pandit families in the corridor of the school emanated smells of traditional Kashmiri tea, turnip soup and *monjhaakh*. A few classrooms away, old men sat on a pavement and waited for events of the unknown day to unfold. The waiting kept the old from stumbling into oblivion.

Another family from a remote village in Kashmir spread their belongings in the room they occupied. Odd things emerged from the baskets and large tin cans. Old and mangled electric wiring peeled from the walls of their old house, broken switches, bulbs, lanterns, keys, clogs, idols, photos of grandparents, ornaments, a huge stone mortar, a pestle, a radio, a winnower, a broom, hand fans made of dried willow stems, empty brass vessels and some strings. An old man arranged all these things on the floor and touched them as though they were newly acquired, prized possessions. He kept the bank passbook carefully in his pocket. His wife shouted at him for not making some room for her cooking. She busied herself in sweeping the floor. The utensils she took out from a trunk lay haywire.

There was only one block of latrines for the entire school. The stench was appalling. The sweeper kept away and did not show up for days together. The men went reluctantly to the stinking latrines to relieve themselves. Some women covered their noses with the ends of their sarees and took with them buckets full of soil to cover the faeces. There were others who refused to use the latrines. The faucets ran dry. The stray dogs were all around.

The only sign of life in the school compound was a banana tree.

Those who arrived at the school to seek lodging were shocked to see all the rooms occupied. Even the dingy corners were full of people and their luggage. Men and women peeped from small windows and did not utter a word when they saw others searching for shelter.

Lasa rejoined his family in the afternoon. An acquaintance of his from their old locality in Srinagar took him to the temple complex in the Jammu city, where the temple authorities accommodated the Pandit families in some of the rooms. That day Sridar accompanied some youngsters to explore the city. In the bright afternoon sun, the temple complex exuded radiance, with devotional songs playing in the background. Children ran in the labyrinthine corridors of the temple complex. An old Pandit sat on the steps and chanted some hymns to swallow his anxiety.

'This is our end. We have only the past to seek refuge in' Lasa lamented.

He entered the weary room in which his family had taken refuge. Mahanandju sat in a corner, silent and stupefied, as though lost in a trance. Lasa's mother kept vigil over the belongings, while his wife opened the bundles containing some essential things. Time wore a mask and treaded slowly. Mahanandju was not sure of anything. What tormented him was the solidity of pain!

'Here, take a pillow,' Lasa's wife said to Mahanandju when she saw him experience discomfort as he sat cross-legged in the corner.

Lasa reclined against a wall and did not speak.

'How is it over there? Any more deaths?' his wife asked.

'No. Not in our locality. All the Pandits have left. No one is left behind,' Lasa said.

'Did you bring along everything?'

'Almost everything!'

'I saw Mohanji and his wife in the temple last evening. They were alone. It seems their children have left them to fend for themselves. They don't even have their household belongings,' his wife said.

Lasa yawned and shook his head in disbelief.

'Where are they staying?' he asked.

'They got into a room at the camp set up near the stadium, but they can't adjust there. So, they spend the day in the temple and go to the room only to sleep at night. A water tanker comes once in the morning, so that the people can fill their buckets.'

'What has become of us in these times?' Lasa wondered. 'It seems that all the people from the villages are staying in the tents at the camp. They have no money.'

'Where are we headed towards now? What shall we do now? Do we have to stay here forever?' his wife asked, trembling with fear.

'This will not last forever. We will return home soon,' Lasa thought.



Mahanandju didn't shave for the first few days. It was the first time in his life he didn't feel like waking up early and shaving. He missed the corner of his room. Gowri didn't open the trunks and the boxes at all. They just took out some utensils and clothes. Lasa managed to get a stove. They occupied

a dormitory in the school, wherein many other families from different villages camped.

Lasa and Sridar explored the place; the nearest vegetable market, the grocery and the water tankers supplying drinking water to the school. They went from one camp to another where Pandits had sought shelter. They searched for familiar faces with whom they could socialise and talk about what needed to be done.

In the dormitory children from different families became friends and played hide and seek, unaware of the condition their families found themselves in. Their mothers and fathers constantly shouted at the children, who played pranks and hid behind the tin trunks and wooden boxes spread all over the dormitory. The children thought that they had assembled in their relatives' places to attend some functions. They recalled how, on several previous occasions, they had stayed like this for days together during marriages, when all the relatives arrived from different places and occupied big rooms of a large house.

The families piled trunk upon trunk and box upon box to create partitions in the dormitory. Some women put a clothesline across the walls and hung old sarees and bedspreads to create separate rooms. An old woman sat still the whole day, with beads in her hands. She counted the trunks to know which family had salvaged the most number of household items from their house. There were families who came with just one or two pieces of luggage and others who arrived empty-handed escaping the horror of death threats.

Lasa saw the colourful drapes that hung on a clothesline in the dormitory. The smell of kerosene mixed with that of monjhaakh that was being cooked in vessels. He spent the afternoons away from the dormitory.

Sridar noticed a girl aged nine or ten, who created a ruckus. Her parents were from a distant village in Kashmir. They spoke in a dialect which Sridar found hard to follow. Her parents constantly argued with each other over small things. Her mother didn't like her husband staying in the dormitory all the time, doing nothing but eat, sleep and talk.

'What do you want me to do? Is there anything worthwhile left for me to do?' the man asked his wife irritably.

When he ignored her nagging, she talked to herself and complained of having to live with a useless man.

'We lost everything, our house, our shop and our orchard,' she sobbed while stirring a bowl of rice on the stove. Her husband owned a shop near their house in the village. They had to flee in the dead of the night when their neighbours warned them of a threat to Pandits and advised them to leave. The woman said that she hadn't even washed the utensils the previous night.

The little girl played tirelessly the whole day and created a din in the dormitory. Her brother sat in a corner. He was mentally challenged and made strange voices. His mother fed him rice and wiped his mouth.

One day, a delegation from the government visited the school. They came to inspect the arrangements like the sanitary condition in the school and the supply of drinking water. They announced that the Pandits had been given temporary shelter in the school, and everyone would have to shift to other camps which were being set up in the vicinity.

Nobody was prepared to shift once more. Some women cursed their luck. The little girl's mother told her that they would have to leave once again. 'We have to go and see grandpa at his house,' she said to the girl.

'But, mommy, you said the same thing in our house. When do we go and visit grandpa's house? Where are Nanu and Nani?' the girl begged. Her mother scolded her.

'Have patience. Tomorrow, we will leave,' she comforted the girl. The girl suspected that something fishy was going on and that her mother was lying. She didn't want to shift all over again.

'When will tomorrow come mommy?' the girl asked her mother.

In the days to come, Sridar always remembered her as the little girl who waited for a *tomorrow which never came*. 'Tomorrow' was the day when her mother had promised to take her to grandfather's house.

After spending some weeks at the makeshift camp in the government school, Lasa and Sridar decided to take a room on rent in the city. It took them days to search for a proper room with a kitchen and a bathroom. They visited houses in which rooms were available for rent. The residents had opened some barns, buffalo sheds and dilapidated shops for the Pandits to occupy at low rates. There were rooms without kitchens and bathrooms. There were rooms without windows. Rooms meant just four walls and a roof. Sridar and Lasa saw all of them. They saw Pandits huddled mute in such rooms.

After days of searching, they decided to shift in one such room. The room was small and dark and was built as a barn. The ceiling was low. There was no window in the wall that faced the street. The only ventilator was the door. There was no latch on the door either. The toilet was on the terrace. It did not have a cistern. The landlord said that the sweeper had to be called everyday to clean the toilet. The sweeper's charges were to be negotiated with him directly. The room overlooked

a street which led to the main market in the locality. The drains criss-crossed and formed a maze.

'What is the address of this house?' Lasa asked dryly.

The landlord thought for a minute and looked at his wife.

'House Number 101, Ward Number 4 . . .' the landlord said, struggling to remember the details.

'Tomorrow we will shift into this room,' Lasa said to him and paid an advance rent for one month.

'Welcome to your new home! We have so much respect for the Pandits. You are such a learned community. It is so sad that you had to leave your home behind,' the landlord's wife said with a smile. Her smile was reassuring.

'Thank you! We will get our belongings tomorrow,' Lasa said.

'Panditji, we are nothing in comparison to you. But we are your brothers. You can trust us. We have so much to learn from you,' the man said apologetically. 'The Muslims after all showed their true colour,' he added sardonically.

Sridar explored the new home, the walls, the courtyard, the terrace, and the staircase leading to the rooms. He looked for signs of previous occupants, of some traces of their having stayed in the room. There were none. The room had not been painted at all. A lone shelf that protruded from the wall was empty. Sridar remembered the stained glass window of his room in the house he had left behind, and the view from the room. The memory was hazy, the reflections blurred, the images distorted. He looked at his father as though he expected him to say something reassuring. After a few minutes, he broke the silence.

'The room looks good,' he said to his father.

'Yes, it is airy too,' Lasa replied. 'We can decorate the walls with the wall hangings that we have in our trunks. After all we need to put them to good use in our new home.'

On the street Sridar saw an old Pandit galumph aimlessly with a cabbage in his hand. He held it tight as though it were precious. His gait was awkward, uncertain. He stopped at a shop, unable to decide in which direction to walk further and then sat down as though he had all the time in the world to reach his destination.

Sridar explored the vicinity of the new locality; the houses shops, shopkeepers, temples, narrow lanes, vegetable vendors the dry waterless riverbed and the lone bridge over it, colour of the children, the dresses they wore, the smiles of young beautiful girls who spoke a different language, and many new things unseen till today. He grew scared of the evenings.

'The sunset is hollow here,' he mused.

There were Pandits all around the town, searching for rooms and accommodation on rent. They were searching for vegetables, for registration centres, for newspaper vendors. People distributed pamphlets that carried information on registration centres and the camps being set up by the government.

Thousands of Pandits were lined up outside a registration centre. The government had announced relief to the Pandits who had migrated. It included a monthly allowance of five hundred rupees and some kilos of rice and sugar. People from the village who had lost their only means of livelihood, their orchards and farms, queued up in front of the registration centers.

The government had announced that the Pandits who worked in different state departments in Kashmir would continue to receive their monthly salaries. In office

documents and records, the expression used was 'Internally Displaced Migrants'.

Outside the registration centre, an old man and his wife waited for their turn to get registered as migrants. The queue was long, and every moment seemed long and dreary. The registration process was fraught with perils. There were the queues, the documents, the papers and the forms. The woman talked aloud to herself. She mumbled some inanities; signs of fatigue and disorientation. Others in the queue made gestures at one another.

A bystander asked the old man if his children were around.

'They abandoned us,' the woman said indignantly.

'They must be around somewhere looking for us,' her husband clarified wistfully.

The queue lengthened steadily as the day spread its long tentacles. Migrants emerged from all corners to stand in the long queue. From behind the small window, the registration clerk extended his hand to scrutinise the papers of the old man. The old man did not know how to greet the registration clerk. He was dazed. The migrants were asked to report to the Special Officer. They filled up forms and wrote their permanent addresses in Kashmir on them. The dates were important too. One had to remember the date of migration as well as the date of arrival at the new place.

The form asked: Permanent Address in Valley.

'What shall I write here? My address is – Yesterday,' mocked one migrant while staring at a form.

The officer wrote the registration numbers on the cards and allocated them to the migrants. The migrants were asked to collect ration cards in order to receive the monthly cash relief

and rice and sugar. Those who had nowhere to go and shelter were allotted canvas tents, erected in a deserted cricket stadium on the outskirts of the city, just across the highway.

A young woman lay half-asleep in a pool of vomit. Her shadow melted in the sun. A bystander tried to help her with water. Someone swooned. The rest of the migrants struggled to get ahead with the registration process. The local inhabitants watched the scene, aghast and appalled with horror.

'We were slain there. And now we will be slain here,' a young man mourned.

'We are safe now,' someone else commented.

'I do not wish to be cremated here. I long for my room.' An old man standing nearby howled.

It was a procession of old men and women. Suddenly, the entire migrant community seemed to have grown old. The old seemed to outnumber the young.

An old woman stood in the queue for registration. She went on mumbling how she lived in her old house in Kashmir.

'Here, I sweat blood and tears,' she said wailing.

Not far from the queue, there was a corner where men urinated. The women went further behind the ruins of a cowshed to relieve themselves. They waited for the evening to return to the camps.

An old man waited for his turn at the window of the registration office. The hand from behind the window inspected the papers and handed over a card with a registration number written on it. The old man smiled a sad smile and pocketed it carefully. He walked with his wife to the nearby bus stop and boarded a bus to the camp.

A politician came and asked the migrants to assemble on the ground. He wanted to address them. His yes-men carried

pamphlets and distributed them among the migrants. The pamphlets announced a rally to be held in the cricket stadium to address the woes of the migrants.

The old man was reminded of a festival they celebrated in Kashmir. As he waited for the bus patiently, he pulled out the card from his pocket and tried to memorise the registration number.

The politician addressed the gathering. There was no applause.

'You shall return to your homes . . .'

'When?' a young man got up and shouted.

He kept standing and waited for an answer. There was none.



Mahanandju woke up early on the first day in their new rented home. He wanted to shave, but could not locate his shaving kit. There was no mirror.

'Why shave? I shall perish soon!' he lisped mournfully.

He searched for his mirror in the trunk. It was not there.

'The mirror is not here. We must have left it in our house. You don't need it anymore,' his wife said, seeing him rummage through the utensils.

'I am a man without a reflection,' he laughed mockingly.

Each day brought new problems and difficulties. The calendar on the wall lost its meaning. No one looked at it. The dates seemed meaningless. It was difficult for Mahanandju to tell the past from the present. He longed to live life backwards.

With each passing day and night, he grew fond of his loneliness. He reflected on the past and remembered the days

in Kashmir; the weeping willows and the dancing saffron buds, the lush green rice fields and the singing hoopoes. He dreamt of his old home in Kashmir.

Every morning Lasa and Sridar walked to the newspaper vendor to buy newspapers and read about the situation in the Valley. There was news about protests, killings, crossfire raids, crackdowns and processions on the streets. There was news about new militant organisations being formed. There was news about Pandits running away from their homes in the villages and towns and migrating to Jammu.

The camp set up at the cricket stadium became a place for the migrants to struggle for survival. The place drowned in a thousand voices. The government set up schools for migrant children. Work was afoot to set up camp colleges as well.

Giridari Lal and his wife, father and mother had shifted into a tent in the camp. He had sent his young daughter to Delhi to be with his wife's brother, who was settled there. For days, Giridari Lal's wife and his ailing mother could not go to the toilet in the camp. It was a row of makeshift toilets. The walls were made of wooden planks. Thick sheets of tin with holes and other scrap from the junkyard formed the roof. There were no bathrooms. They all went either to the school or the temple to bathe. Slowly, inconvenience became a habit. They got used to the new way of life. Giridari Lal and his old father spent most of the days outside the tent. It was all cramped inside. His ailing mother was bedridden.

Sridar frequented the migrant camp regularly. Lasa made new acquaintances. Idle conversations resulted in friendships. In the new locality, Mahanandju met Chaju Ram, an old man who once owned many shops which now belonged to his son. Chaju Ram and Mahanandju spent days together listening

to each other's tales. Chaju Ram's daughter-in-law had great respect for Mahanandju.

The results of Sridar's examination were announced. He passed with average marks. Lasa drew up various options for Sridar's further schooling. He was worried on account of Sridar's education and admission in a good school.

'I am accumulating the ammunition,' Sridar said to his father. 'Someday, I will write a story about all this.'

Lasa inspected all the papers he had brought along from his old house. Court papers of his house, educational certificates, appointment letter of Lasa's job at the school in Kashmir, manuscripts, his grandfather's letters and a trunk full of books.

'We must go to Delhi to get you admitted to a school,' Lasa said to Sridar. 'Seeking admission in a good school will not be an easy task. But we must try and not waste any time.'

Lasa and Sridar decided to depart for Delhi within a week. There were preparations to be made. Sridar accepted his father's decision unwillingly. To him education did not mean anything at all. He hated the idea of going to a school or a college and listening to teachers' lectures.

In the evenings Sridar read the books which he had excavated from the trunks. He found solace in the stories; the victories and the defeats of the characters. He made up his mind to revive his writing. He wanted to write poetry. Evenings at his new home descended peacefully. He would gaze at the pale sky for hours till stars appeared, one by one, in the sky. Somewhere else – afar – the snow melted on the mountain tops. Summer hid somewhere near a corner. Behind the mountains, his old house existed in despair. Every afternoon he loitered in the migrant camp and spent the evenings at the terrace, memorising new

words he had learnt. He imagined scenes about love. He did not have any friends and the thought of carrying his loneliness with him in his heart, all through his life, tormented him. His secret desires and yearnings lay buried in his heart. His fears and dreams were imprisoned in his being.

The sullenness in his heart gave rise to a passionate desire to experience new things, dream new dreams and explore a new world. The will to live surfaced and he took to exploring the world around him. He listened to his heart. Dreams returned to him in his sleep. They took hold of him while he was awake.

At the camp he saw maddening crowds of people jostling for water. Men and women waited for hours for ration cards. Young girls and boys fetched water in the buckets from afar.

He saw family members huddled in tents in rain. He looked at the tents lined up in an array. On the canvas of one tent he read the initials of an occupant: D.N.G., Tent Number: 63. When he entered the tent, he trembled at the darkness inside. He saw grim faces staring at one another; a family of ten still in a canvas dwelling. Three generations with grandfather and grandmother, father and mother, daughter, son and daughter-in-law and two children, all clung to one another. A small opening overlooked another canvas tent. Sridar marvelled at their ingenuity of creating a small corner for their kitchen where they placed some thalis, vessels, plastic boxes containing spices, a stove and a can full of kerosene. He vowed never to enter that tent ever again.

Over the next few days, many more ready-to-move-in canvas tents were erected in the outskirts of the city to accommodate the migrants who arrived.

A week later Lasa and Sridar set out for Delhi in a bus.

The idea of Delhi weighed heavy on Sridar's heart. He was not prepared for a big city. He had heard of it as a cruel city, where there were no evenings and where there weren't any lazy afternoons.

The first day in Delhi was just about phone calls to different people Lasa knew. Friends of friends and acquaintances of acquaintances! There were a myriad names listed in Lasa's pocket diary. There were numbers and addresses. In the evenings, Lasa and Sridar sauntered the streets at Connaught Place and spent some time in the coffee house. The coffee house was frequented by Kashmiri Pandits.

The Pandits discussed the politics of Kashmir. They sipped coffee and talked about migration, life in Kashmir and life in exile.

'We are not migrants. We left Kashmir long back, and ever since live in our own houses in Delhi,' argued a gentleman wearing a coat and a necktie, sipping coffee. 'But, we are with the new migrants in this moment of pain. We know how it feels to be homeless. We understand this alienation,' he added.

'Good that we left Kashmir long back,' another man blurted indignantly. 'What did we have there that belonged to us anyway? There was no beauty at all. It was a wretched darkness. Pandits were living on borrowed time. This had to happen one day. There was no trust between the Pandits and the Muslims; only pretence. Exile has always been our destiny. I lost my old house ages ago, but I gained my freedom outside Kashmir.'

Lasa sat silent and struggled to tell one migrant from another. Who was a migrant and who was not? There were those who had left recently, and others who had left their homes in the late 1940s.

The days in Delhi were chaotic and bereft of any hope. Sridar's admission in a private school was not so easy after all. In many schools, the admissions stood closed, and in others Sridar's marks did not qualify him for admission. They roamed from one school to the other in the merciless heat of Delhi. One of Lasa's friends suggested a boarding school at Simla. One newspaper bore a story of the government considering reservation for the migrant students in various schools and colleges across the country. Lasa did not lose hope.

Simla reminded Sridar of Kashmir. Lasa and Sridar relished the chill in the air when they arrived at Simla. They stayed at a lodge. The early morning tea and coffee served at the lodge were refreshing. The smell of fresh green vegetables and spices filled the bazaar. Sridar's thoughts meandered aimlessly. He did not know which place to call his home. Kashmir, Jammu or Delhi! He wondered if there were other places he would visit. Lasa worried on account of his son's admission. He wanted Sridar to join an institution. The boarding schools at Simla were expensive. The warden of the hostel, who was also a lecturer in the school, was sympathetic towards Lasa and Sridar. He invited them to the staffroom for some coffee and regretted his inability to help them with the admission. He suggested other schools elsewhere.

'No school will be willing to admit a homeless migrant one without an address,' Sridar thought.

Sridar resigned to the turn of events and decided to stay with his family. He did not wish to go through any more distress, given his restless temperament. He grew restive as he reconciled to his new beginning at his one-room tenement. He pleaded with his father and convinced him of the merits of returning to Jammu and joining the camp school for migrants.

set up near the cricket stadium, which also housed the migrant colony. It was to remain one for years to come.

Lasa agreed to Sridar's wish to return to Jammu and stay with the family. They spent some days in Simla and returned to Jammu.

Years later, Sridar was to reminisce his first day at the camp school with much fondness.

Gopi Nath was at the peak of his career when he had to migrate. He had expected to be promoted as the headmaster of the school where he taught in Kashmir. But when he joined the camp school, he gave up all hope of becoming the headmaster. In the school he roamed aimlessly trying to bury the memory of his dream. Despite the condition he found himself in, he awaited an order without any hope of seeing his name. Days later, he received the order and a letter of promotion from the Department of Education, stating that he was promoted to be the headmaster of the camp school. He read his name over and over again and thought it was a dream. Everyone in the camp school congratulated him. He sat in a tent, a makeshift staffroom, and gave a lecture to all the migrant teachers. He became restless and spent hours strolling in the camp. He watched the students come out of their tents in the morning to enter other tents, which were classrooms. There was no bell in the school. No one dusted the benches. In many tents, students sat on rugs and listened inattentively to the lectures delivered by sleepy teachers. During the recess, everyone went back to their tents to have their meal. Some students preferred to keep away from the afternoon sessions and enjoy a siesta on the cots outside the tents. And many others went to buy lottery tickets with the money their parents gave them. The teachers played cards and carrom and discussed the affairs of the school.

Gopi Nath's wife cooked rice and cheese for him on the day he received the order announcing his appointment as headmaster of the camp school. She sent some portion to her neighbours to celebrate her husband's promotion and share the joy with them. That day Gopi Nath couldn't sit still. 'Why are you so agitated?' his wife asked him, seeing him leaf irritably through a bunch of papers in his hand. 'Aren't you happy that you are the school headmaster now? You should not act stressful.'

He scolded her.

'I have important responsibilities to discharge. The school is in a mess. Can't you see? I have to set things right. The students should not feel neglected. Do you know what it is to run a camp school?'

In the night, he slept in snatches. He woke up and couldn't sleep at all.

'Aren't you getting good sleep? Is something bothering you?' his wife asked.

Gopi Nath stared at the bulb that hung from a wire hooked on the pole of the canvas tent.

'It is the happiest day of my life,' he said and cried. 'I want this day to last forever.'

Every day Gopi Nath woke up early and bathed at a spring nearby. He wore a coat and put on a necktie like he used to do in Kashmir. He took all the Chemistry lessons himself and spent the afternoons inspecting the other classes. When he saw his colleagues wasting time in idle gossip, he asked them to take more interest in their classes. He reprimanded one teacher when he couldn't speak in his class.

'Why teach? The students are not interested in the classes. I have forgotten everything. There is chaos everywhere,' lamented the teacher who taught Mathematics.

'This attitude will not do. The attendance in your class is falling down,' Gopi Nath reprimanded.

For many days, Gopi Nath tried to set things right in the school. In the evenings, he gave lessons to the students.

Sridar's first day at the camp school was eventful. He wore a blue coat. The sky was clear. The district administration had allocated a dozen tents to the school administration. One tent was used as a makeshift office and others were used as classrooms. Migrant boys and girls, who lived in the tents, simply walked from their tents into the other tents to attend their classes. The teachers were migrants who had taught in various government schools in Kashmir. Sridar hated sciences and waited the whole day for the English class. There was poetry to be read and some essays and short stories too.

Lasa spent his days in varied conversations with his new friends and neighbours. Conversations helped allay the torment of an alien surrounding. There was not much to do on most days. Doing nothing was laborious sometimes. He hated the nights. He could not read. The books were still in the trunk, which was used as a settee for guests to sit on. There was paucity of furniture in the room. He lost interest in his hobbies. Reading seemed cumbersome and useless.

'What good are these books?' Lasa wondered. He wanted to burn them. Gowri could not get used to the new kitchen. Her only occupation became assisting her daughter-in-law with cooking. Once a while, she cooked fish, dried turnip and rice for Mahanandju. Lasa bought a new mirror for his father. The migrant priests brought out a new almanac for the families to plan the festivities in the months and also to keep track of the auspicious days.

Lasa fished some old books from his trunk to adorn the lone shelf in the room; hardbound editions of poetry, anthologies and story books.

‘Won’t these look good on the shelf?’ he wondered.

He thought these books would give a semblance of culture to the new rented house in which they lived. The books did not remain untouched for long. They were dusted every day. Sridar used the hardbound books to hide some bits of paper on which he had scribbled notes for his essays and writings. Soon, he started reading the books his father had carried in the trunks. At school he was an average student. Mathematics was his greatest fear. Numbers made no sense. He failed miserably even at cramming the solutions to the problems. Somehow, he wanted to pass the examination with marks which would get him into a college. Examinations had no meaning for him.

Sridar met Pamposh in one of the classes at the camp school. Pamposh wore a torn and rugged pheran even when summer had started. Pamposh’s rugged appearance and unkempt look intrigued Sridar, who was always well-dressed. Sridar had finished composing a poem on living in the new land.

Pamposh reminded Sridar of someone he had long forgotten. He lived in one of the tents nearby. He talked to no one and no one talked to him. The teachers took no interest in him, but advised him to pay attention to the class lectures. After the class lectures, Pamposh would run back to his tent and disappear in the darkness. To some teachers he seemed wayward.

Sridar decided to talk to Pamposh during a vacant period. Initial attempts at conversation failed. Sridar saw Pamposh hide behind the water tanks in the camp and smoke cigarettes. He saw him collect half-smoked cigarettes and discarded cigarette butts from the roadside and treasure them in his pheran pocket.

He had perfected the art of smoking two cigarette butts at the same time. One day Sridar asked Pamposh to accompany him to a tea shop near the highway and offered to buy him a cigarette. Pamposh agreed to join him.

'What are your plans after completing higher secondary school?' Sridar asked Pamposh while having tea.

'I am not sure. Have not thought about it yet! Let the time come,' he said. 'Are you also thinking of going to Delhi or some other big city to pursue engineering?'

'I find engineering boring. Maybe, I will not make a good engineer. Sometimes, I feel that I am a wanderer. If life was a dream, I would happily join the gypsies.'

Pamposh smiled and offered Sridar a cigarette. 'I have never had one, although I am tempted to try one today,' Sridar said. 'Where did you live in Kashmir, Pamposh?'

Pamposh fell silent for a moment. Sridar looked into his eyes. Pamposh fixed his gaze at Sridar as though he had lost himself in the labyrinth of time.

Sridar wondered if he had asked the right question.

'How does it matter now?' Pamposh said. 'It surely does not matter! Where we came from? How we left our houses behind? What we lost?'

On most days, both of them spent a lot of time together after school. Pamposh would smoke and Sridar would drink cups of tea at the tea shop. Sridar told Pamposh about his hobbies and about how he enjoyed writing poetry.

'I would be happy to listen to your poem. Please, recite some lines for me. I hope it is not a long one. Is it about love?'

Pamposh implored.

'It is about autumn in Kashmir.'

Sridar recited the poem. He read slowly as though it was necessary to touch each word, each syllable, each line, and feel the warmth.

*'... the winds bury the dreams
of autumn,
elsewhere one more day
is put to death.
The chinar shrieks into a fading silence,
the embankment is stained crimson.
The village is all astir.
Some forsaken reminiscences
still watch the grim scene
from a lone corner
of my lost childhood ...'*

Pamposh listened with all his heart and soul. The look on his face was one that evoked pity and fear. He recited the lines that Sridar read to him. He recited them many times, over and over again, to feel the presence of autumn.

Moments later Pamposh cried. Sridar heaved a sigh. He felt sad that his poem had brought tears in Pamposh's eyes.

'I wish I too could write poetry,' Pamposh said listlessly. 'I can feel like a poet. I do not know the words. I cannot find the voice. But I can see the pain. I can feel the pain. I can paint the silence. I have seen my soul hung on a clothesline and perish in the hard sun. The mad laughter of the lunatic cannot be ignored.'

He fell silent again and toyed with a cigarette butt in his fingers.

'Life teaches us that there is beauty in ugliness,' Sridar said.

Then Pamposh said something that Sridar was not prepared for.

'Every day I lead the life of a centipede. I crawl. I lick. I hide. I sting. I wake up to the fumes of kerosene in the morning and the sting of speeding ants, feeding ravenously on the sugar spilled on the floor of the tent. It feels as if I have never had a morsel of rice for ages. I wake up hungry and go to bed hungry. I lead the life of a centipede, I crawl. All around the camp, there is stench of human excrement and waste. People wake up in the morning, hungry and muddled. The awakenings are pallid. The water in the water tanker smells foul, and children lie whole day in their own vomit. The quivering smile on my mother's face is false. I want to peel off that false smile from her face, so that she is beautiful once again. Father spends most of the time playing cards with the other migrants near the highway tea shop. I am a mute spectator to the horrors of the life inside my tent. The air inside is squalid. My grandfather barely speaks. He lost his voice while leaving the village. A young man had shown him a gun as he was returning from a butcher's shop. He still thinks that the young man is hiding around a corner, with a gun, waiting to scare him. He stopped talking after we crossed the Banihal tunnel. I saw him look sadly at the fading mountains for long, till they disappeared completely, one by one, into his frozen dreams. And he swallowed his fright. Today I cannot hear what he says. His words do not come out of his mouth. When we are asleep, we cannot even stretch our arms and legs. There are no hangers to hang our clothes on. No cupboards to keep our personal belongings in. We have no portraits of our gods and goddesses. No pictures of our ancestors. During the day, we hide from the blazing sun. At night we live from one insect bite to another. Centipedes,

millipedes and spiders are our companions. We must learn how to live with them.

'My grandmother does not recognise the insects. She confuses a lizard for a plastic toy paralysed on the wall. Her gaze is fixed at the crucified lizard. For hours and hours, she just gazes endlessly into a dark nothingness! It is a vacant gaze into a world of oblivion and amnesia. Petrified with a sense of desolation, she does not even feel the presence of hundreds of mosquitoes circling her head constantly while she stares into blank space. I do not know if she is hungry or thirsty. When asleep, she resembles a corpse. She perspires. I wake up to feel her pulse and feel happy that she is still breathing. She would be happy in her death, I pray. My mother and sister wash their clothes and the utensils in a puddle of water outside our tent. They line up for hours in the morning to use the makeshift toilet made of torn shreds of canvas, pieces of cardboard and tin. They await their turn at the filthy and stinking toilets while the loitering men watch the women wait to relieve themselves. Many women prefer to go to the stinking latrines at midnight, away from the stare of men. Even the mosquitoes keep away from the foul smelling latrines. Sometimes, I hear women shriek, fall silent and then cry in solace behind the filthy tank. The nights bring squalor, pallor and heat. We live in fear of the mangled and naked electric wires, criss-crossed around wooden poles that hold the canvas of the tent together.

'There is a large rash on my grandfather's leg, a rash perhaps from the bite of a millipede. The rash has swollen and become sore now. It oozes puss and resembles a horrifying wound. He scratches the wound with a knife. The festering wound will never heal. I want to burn the wound. The old man looks at my sister, change clothes at bedtime. She puts

out the light. There are no curtains to hide behind. She sleeps in snatches, sandwiched like an insect between her mother and her grandmother. She dreams nervy dreams of crawling insects in the sun and the shade. The old man wants to touch her clothes hanging from the hook. He smells the clothes of his own granddaughter. And he relishes their putrid smell. We lick the hours that weigh heavy on our half-asleep existence, and tread laboriously into an endless strain of nightmares. The earthen pot in the tent is empty. A discarded plastic bottle used for the toilet contains a few drops of water. I grab it and empty the drops into my parched mouth. My tongue is dry. It can fall off anytime. My grandmother shrieks when she sees the sun. She dreads stepping out of the tent for fear of fainting in the sun. She soils her clothes every day. She can't even use the bedpan which my mother got for her. From morning to evening she clings to the old box, which she brought along. It sticks inseparably to her chest. I wonder if there are any ornaments or valuables left in it.

'Never before have I felt the desire to unknow myself and others. The smell . . . the touch . . . the breath . . . the sigh!

'In an adjacent tent a family of five torture an old man, their foster-grandfather, who lost his mental balance upon seeing his house fade away in a hazy distance. The old man is a burden for his son and daughter-in-law. Another mouth to feed, they feel! He moans at night constantly, and intermittently wakes up to a cold shiver – a nightmare. His son and daughter-in-law taunt him for their amusement. They whisper in his ears that his mother was dead and that she was beaten mercilessly to death. The old man groans and pleads them not to utter the atrocities. Every evening, the torment continues. The maddening laughter of the men ricochets from the battered canvas tent. Every night

the old man cries. He gapes at his son and daughter-in-law and gives them his blessings.

'Darkness! Darkness!

'I wonder what is moral and what is immoral.'

Sridar stopped breathing for a while as Pamposh described his experience and condition. He picked up Pamposh's pack of cheap cigarettes. For the first time, he lit a cigarette and took a puff. The smoke danced its way into the air and disappeared in the whirl of the ceiling fan.

That day Sridar wrote his thoughts in his journal. He wrote about Pamposh and the horrid mine of his consciousness.

'What would it be like to be Pamposh?' Sridar mused. He remembered the last words Pamposh had told him the previous day. 'I long for a child's laughter,' Pamposh had whispered in Sridar's ear.

Pamposh never spoke of his days in Kashmir. Sridar tried to strike such conversations with him to get to know about Pamposh's childhood days in his village in Kashmir. Pamposh's family came from a village in Kashmir. Some students in the camp told Sridar that Pamposh's family owned an orchard in Kashmir and grew pomegranates, cherries and walnuts. Pamposh's childhood may have been full of pranks, Sridar thought. Someone mentioned that Pamposh's family was the only Pandit family in their village, and that they had to run away from their home in the most horrifying of circumstances. No one was able to narrate what had happened. Pamposh had lost one home and he was not in search of another.

The migrants sat all day long on a rocky mound and discussed the affairs of their community. Days were spent sitting and talking about whatever came to their minds; their plight and their sordid condition. Waiting kept them busy. For

many it was a lacerating wait. They had not yet realised that this waiting was not to end. They did not know what they were waiting for. This waiting was not for returning to their homes, not for peace in the Valley, but for a new day to dawn and the new evening to descend. They prayed for a day without a sunstroke and a night without a snakebite.

Pamposh met Sridar every day after school near an anthill. He wished to demolish the anthill with a spade and to render the snakes homeless, so that no snakebites would take place in the camp.

There was only one question to be asked during the funeral processions that left the camp every day.

'Snakebite or sunstroke?'

In the coming days Sridar and Pamposh saw many camp dwellers line up, one by one, in the crematorium. Between them breathed words bereft of any meaning! Words! Silence!



Sridar looked from the terrace of his one-room tenement and secretly admired the sunset. When he had nothing to do, he tried to reach for the leaves of a banana tree in the courtyard. He watched the neighbourhood girls play in the courtyard. Their laughter and the words they spoke in an alien language were beautiful. He longed for their lovely glances.

In the monsoons, nettles grew fast around the hillocks surrounding the camp. Incessant rains made matters worse for the camp dwellers.

For months together marriages in the Pandit migrant community did not happen at all. No birth took place in any of the families living in the camps. There were only deaths.

In the neighbourhood where Lasa lived, a Pandit spent his days telling the beads in his rosary. He was given to a life of quietude. His son Prem Nath worked in a bank in a small town in Kashmir. After migrating to Jammu, they shifted to a room that had been used by the landlord to house a buffalo. The son lived with his mother, father, and wife and a daughter. Every morning they would all go to different places to defecate. On his way to the grocer's shop, Prem Nath knocked at the door of Lasa's room.

'Let lightning strike the Prime Minister. Look at our condition. The government is mute and deaf,' Prem Nath shouted, hurling invectives.

'Come and have tea Prem Nath,' Lasa said.

'Thank you Lasa! Am in a hurry! Have to fetch some lavasas for Panditji and Rani.'

Every day he spent an hour in Lasa's room sharing anecdotes of different migrant families and talked about the apathy of the government towards the displaced community.

'A monetary relief of 500 rupees and a few kilos of rice and sugar for a migrant family!' Prem Nath blurted in anger. 'How can this money and rice be enough for the families who feasted on meat and fish thrice a week in their homes in Kashmir? We are exploited in our own country. The people who we trusted drove us away from our own land, and this land will drive us mad. We are victims of discrimination. Our country does not care for us and our children. May the government officials burn in hell!'

'You are right Prem Nath. It is our fate to live like this,' Lasa said to dismiss Prem Nath's tirade and prevent him from spilling more venom. He wanted to tell the guest that incessant complaining was of no good to anyone.

'How many ration cards do you have Lasa?'

'None Prem Nath. What is the need? The government pays me migrant salary here. I am content with what I have.'

'Have you lost your senses Lasa?' Prem Nath said. 'Get yourself and your family members registered as "Unemployed". You need to get a ration card. After all, how can you refuse the cash relief of 500 rupees and rice and sugar every month?'

'I never gave it a thought Prem Nath. Now that you insist, let me think about this.'

Lasa offered him a cigarette. His wife brought tea and biscuits.

'Lasa, I have arranged for almost a dozen ration cards for my family. It is not that difficult at all. Some forged paperwork did the trick. It is chaotic at the Relief Office. I get six thousand rupees a month now.'

'But how can you have so many ration cards Prem Nath? What if you are caught by the authorities?'

'Lasa, what will happen to everyone will happen to me too. There are persons who have obtained many ration cards. We are a community of cultured persons. For years we led a pious life, a life of hard work, and of virtuous subjugation. We were silent when our women were abused and mocked at. Muslims teased us and called us names. We allowed ourselves be lampooned and laughed at. We lived by our *sanskars*, our values. But now we should struggle and live. How long can we live like this, housed in buffalo sheds? We have daughters to marry. My landlord stopped the water supply to our kitchen. He says we must evacuate soon or pay him two hundred rupees more. My mother can't even weep in the room.'

'These Dogras will take some time to understand us Prem Nath.'

'Lasa, my landlord comes home drunk every night and starts abusing. My daughter hides under the quilt in the room. She is scared. Sometimes, I don't feel safe here.'

Prem Nath fell silent for a while. Then suddenly, he said something which he never wanted to say or accept.

'The Muslims were better. At least, they understood us,' he sighed.

Prem Nath's father greeted Lasa with a mysterious smile every time they met at Prem Nath's house. Prem Nath invited Lasa and Sridar to watch movies on the colour television he had bought with the relief money. Three years later, he bought a small plot of land in Jammu, and erected foundation for a two-room house. One hot summer afternoon, Prem Nath's father died of sunstroke. He fell on a pavement while sauntering idly on a road. Death was instant.



'In Kashmir there were the fearsome curfew, crossfire, gun battles, killings and horror. Here we are at war with our own selves. We despise everything. Our relationships have turned us into ugly creatures. We eat and defecate,' Lasa thought.

He tried to figure out if he was happy in Kashmir or in the new place. He pretended to like the Dogras, but missed his Muslim friends.

He remembered how a Muslim woman had shouted in frenzy from a window, 'May God destroy the seeds of the Pandits.' A Muslim head priest had been killed. A rumour had spread that activists from a Hindu political party had killed the priest. The Muslims did not want to believe that two Muslim youths had killed the priest. They believed that their leaders

wanted them to believe. The truth did not matter. The truth did not exist.

In March 1993, Lasa and his family shifted to Baderkote, a small town. Some migrants from distant villages in Kashmir chose to settle there. There were hills in Baderkote.

Sridar got admission in the camp college and studied Arts. The migrant families did not let the circumstances affect their children's education. Right from the first day of migration, every migrant made efforts to survive and to endure. For the young, the efforts to move on bore good results. The old, however, struggled every day to adapt. For them the struggle meant anxiety, depression and mental deterioration.

Lasa took a two-room tenement on rent. His neighbours were migrants and local residents. The camp college was a ten-minute walk from his place.

The Long Street and the Short Street ran parallel in the town. Most old houses stood tall on either side of the two streets. The streets converged into a crescent that housed many shops. On the edge of the crescent was an old park, frequented by elderly migrants in the evenings to discuss the sordid affairs of Kashmir. There was a graveyard near the bus stop. A crematorium near a temple stood desolate. Within a few days of settling in, Lasa discovered the district library and reading room situated a few steps away from the park. The reading room attracted a retired postmaster, who had never stepped out of the town, except on one occasion when he had visited Jammu to receive an award for his book of poems written in the Dogri language. He was known as 'Postmaster' even after his retirement. He loved to host his friends for poetry recitation sessions. Some poets and writers would drop in even from the adjoining districts. He cultivated good relationship with the

newspaper reporters, who reported news about the literary events organised at his place.

Sridar attended one such literary gathering at his house and recited a poem on the death of a boy during crossfire between the army and the militants.

There was an eerie silence at the end of Sridar's recitation. After a few moments, the postmaster broke the silence.

'Congratulations my son! Your poem is far superior to mine. I like the way you string the words together.'

'Thank you!' Sridar said. 'My poem is about a true incident.'

'I have spent all my life writing poetry. My poetry is about nature, life, man, beauty, love, sadness and parting. Yours is about blood and death. May God give you strength to write more!'

The next day's English daily carried a small news item on the literary gathering. There was a line from Sridar's poem. It was the first time that Sridar had seen his name and the words he had composed in print. He bought two copies of the newspaper that day. He kept a clipping of the news item in his journal. He read the news over and over again. Each word danced. Each word evoked a new meaning. Each line seemed profound.

Lasa discovered a good friend in the postmaster. The conversations they shared gave both of them immense satisfaction and made them meet more frequently. They talked about migration. In his youth the postmaster had read many books. The memory of his childhood kept the conversations alive. He narrated events from his childhood vividly.

'Lasa, for years my job did not allow me the luxury of travel. All I managed was to accompany my wife to her parents' place in a neighbouring village. I hated travelling. Spending even a

night away from my room was an ordeal for me. My home and my post office were my only two ghats. I vacillated between the two. I spent thirty-five years in the post office; first, as a postman, and then the last ten years as a postmaster. Even as a postman I had no work. Ours is a town where no one receives or sends any letters. No one ever bought even a single stamp from our post office. For years, every day I opened the post office and closed it without receiving or despatching even a single letter. Sometimes, I joke with my friends that my life has been a 'no-letters life'. I even wrote a short story about it.'

'It would be a privilege for me to read your story,' Lasa said.

The postmaster said that the story was in the Dogri language, but agreed to narrate the story for Lasa.

'The story is about a postman like me, who worked in a village post office which received no letters for years. Every day he came and left without any letters for anyone. To keep himself from insanity, the postman wrote letters to himself every day. He posted the letters in his own post office, sorted them, then carried the letters home to be read in the evenings. He spent years doing this, over and over again. And one day he became insane. He failed to recognise his own self in the mirror. He forgot the way to his post office and to his own house. To save him from further forgetfulness, his desperate wife purposefully kept him occupied with hundreds of his own letters, some of which were unread. He spent the rest of his life sorting these letters according to the dates in which they were stamped at the post office. He lost the sense of time and started counting the days backwards. Time consumed him backwards. 1960, 1959, 1955, 1945 . . . his letters found a different arrangement every day. Every event happened twice in his story, and every

year occurred twice. One day the postman disappeared from his house. He never returned to his wife or to the hundreds of unread letters he had written to himself. His wife opened the unread letters, one by one, and saw that there was not even a single word written in any of the letters. They were all blank sheets of paper.

'The State Literary Academy thought that my short story was worthy of publication in their annual literary journal. I owe my greatest gratitude to the government for paying me a decent salary for all these years. On the other hand, the military post office did a lot of business. They used to have letters all the time. Letters for the soldiers arrived from their homes and they wrote letters to their loved ones from as far a place as this, which I called 'nowhere!'

'My post office became a resting place for idle people. We devoted our lives to discussing books we read in the district library. Years went by and we stole our way from one evening to another, from one perch to another in our small town. We have not met others who live outside our town. We do not know anyone from other cultures. We have not known suffering or turmoil like you have. We have not felt any pain. But I yearn for the meaning of my shadowy existence.'

Lasa held the postmaster's hand and thanked him for his friendship and hospitality.

'These dark clouds will vanish soon,' the postmaster said to Lasa.



Sridar's mother always complained to Lasa about Sridar's lack of focus on studies and his future. She grew worried

because Sridar showed no interest in pursuing engineering in Delhi or any other city, where migrants sent their children for studies.

‘This place is no good for Sridar’s future,’ she said to Lasa with tears in her eyes. ‘Here, he will waste his life. This place is for people like us, who have nowhere to go. We must send Sridar to the city so that he can study engineering and then get a job and look after us in our old age. Look at our friends and relatives. They sent their children to Karnataka and Maharashtra to take up technical courses. And look at our son! He is wasting his life and does not know what he wants to do. Does he not remember that we lost everything – our house, our future, our land and our identity?’

Sridar listened to her patiently. He understood his mother’s pain and fears. Deep within her she was fearful of seeing her son waste his time in their rented house.

‘I do not want you to spend your savings on my education,’ he said to his mother. ‘I will do well. But I want to stay with you for some more time, till the time I am ready for a life outside.’

‘Look at the children of your father’s friends and relatives Sridar. In some years they will all become engineers and take up jobs in good companies, and then buy land in Jammu and Delhi to construct houses for their families. And look at yourself! You either sleep on the terrace or roam in the streets. During the nights you read useless books,’ she complained.

She was afraid that Sridar might become wayward and live the life of a vagabond. Sridar genuinely did not know what to do. He knew that someday he had to take up a job somewhere. He was more inclined to reading books and writing poetry. Something tormented his soul.

Sridar often thought of Pamposh. He missed him and desired to meet him and know more about his life and his plans ahead.

Tulmul first met Sridar on a wet Sunday afternoon at his home. Sridar had lazed the entire morning and was preparing to walk down the hill to one of the springs for a bath. For some reason, he grew a beard. He was on page 142 of a novel. Fifty pages a day were good enough for him to have a sound sleep in the night. It would take him a week to finish reading the novel.

Tulmul studied Sciences at the Degree college. His father worked with the Military Engineering Services. Lasa and Tulmul's father had met in Jammu. Tulmul's father had helped Lasa take the rooms on rent at Baderkote. They lived in one of the apartments in the army cantonment, a good half-an-hour walk from the Baderkote bus stop.

Tulmul came to visit Sridar's house and hand over a packet sent by his father for Lasa. Their first meeting was quite dull and boring. They did not take much interest in each other's hobbies.

After their first meeting, Sridar did not meet Tulmul for a couple of months. The second time they met was at the tea shop near the college. Sridar stopped there every evening for a cup of tea and cigarettes, before taking the short route to his home. He preferred to walk from the college to the cemetery, take the long winding stairs to the main market, walk along the crescent of shops, stop for a while to smoke a cigarette at the main entrance of the park, drop in at the library to borrow some books, walk in the street and then reach his rented home.

Tulmul was amused to see Sridar smoke

'No thank you!' Tulmul said, seeing Sridar push a pack of cigarettes toward him.

'How are your classes going on?' Tulmul enquired.

'Boring as ever! Who cares for the classes! The scent in the college botanical garden is mesmerising in the rains.'

Tulmul smiled half a smile and nodded.

'Care for a walk to the cemetery? We can stop over at the temple and listen to the chants of the devotees.'

'It is good seeing you after all these months Sridar. Today you do not seem a stranger at all. It feels as if we have known each other for a long time.'

Sridar and Tulmul talked about their interests in life, their daily routine and college. Sridar walked with Tulmul to one of the bends halfway at the long winding Link Road that embraced the hill. He promised to meet Tulmul the next day at the same tea shop.



Sridar laughed. Every time he chased snakes in the house, he broke into a fit of laughter. Incessant rains! The snakes were let loose. The landlady was alone in her house. Her baby cried in her arms, while she held a broomstick in the other hand, trying to scare away the snake which hid behind a pile of mattresses in the room. Her husband was away for work. She shouted for Sridar and sought his help. Inside the house Mahanandju and his wife lay half-naked in their room. They poured water over their bodies to keep themselves cool and ward off the rashes. Every summer brought disease, skin rash and stomach infections to the family.

'Look at what we are going through. For a lifetime we lived amid the snow-capped mountains. The sun we knew gave us warmth, not death. Why doesn't God take us all to his kingdom?' Mahanandju's wife asked him.

Mahanandju sat still. He looked at the windowless walls of the room.

'Let us dig a hole in this wall to create a window,' he said.

'Cursed be the militants for driving us from our house to a land where it does not snow!'

Sridar hit upon a plan. He was not good at using sticks to drive away snakes. He caught hold of an insect repellent liquid and emptied the entire contents in the corner where they suspected the snake hiding. After a few moments the snake came out. The landlady lynched the snake with a broom.

When there were no snakes, there were centipedes crawling from one room to the other. Looking at the ceiling was frightful and unnerving for Sridar's mother. She was afraid to even remove the lids from the utensils in the kitchen.

The families depended on the springs for fresh drinking water. Sridar and his mother took turns to fetch water from the spring.

Mahanandju did not move from the room for days together. Every morning he shaved and then spent the rest of the day fanning himself with a hand fan. He lost his appetite. There was nothing to be done. Sometimes, he stood in front of his shaving mirror and cried silently. At times he spoke to himself. When they had visitors, he narrated anecdotes from his youth. Anecdotes of the speeches of Nehru and Sheikh Abdullah, anecdotes about his Muslim friends and the time spent with them. He never talked about the uprising in Kashmir and the

turn of events, which led to the divide between the Pandits and the Muslims.

Sometimes, Mahanandju talked about his father. His memory had started playing tricks with him, especially with the dates and the sequence in which the events occurred. He stopped listening to the news broadcast on the radio in the evenings. When his wife asked him why he had stopped listening to the news, he said, 'The news yesterday was the same as it was the day before yesterday. It will be the same even today. They will say dozens of people died and hundreds got injured. Nobody knows the truth. Falsehood has become the truth and people like to listen to things which are not true. Blasts and grenade attacks! The Prime Minister said this and that. Throw the radio out of the window. Banish it.'

'Normalcy and peace will return to the Valley,' Lasa said. 'The government is killing militants.' He wanted to reassure his father.

Idleness and a vacuum of the soul engulfed Mahanandju. He started having delusions. Sleep fled him. His thoughts oscillated back and forth the past and the present, the imaginary and the real.

'Chaman Lal will come and take us home,' Mahanandju would often say to Lasa and Sridar. No one in the family knew if Chaman Lal was a friend or a neighbour.

'Who is this Chaman Lal? Is this someone from your dreams?' his wife asked him admonishingly.

'Chaman Lal is my friend who died yesterday,' Mahanandju said.

Later, he would be heard saying that he met Chaman Lal in the market.

'Chaman Lal feels much persecuted. His wife abused him last night and flogged him with nettles. He has rashes all over the body. I gave him some medicines so that he can sleep peacefully at night.'

'It is old age coupled with the trauma of migration which bothers him,' Lasa said to his wife when he observed memory deceive his father. He had taken to blaming everything either on old age or on migration.

'What shall we do now?' she asked.

'Is this depression or something else? We need to stave away decaying thoughts. Keep everyone busy with something. We should play cards when we have nothing to do or read newspapers. Don't just sit looking at the walls for long,' Lasa said.

His mother made all attempts to cultivate friendship with other women in the locality. She talked about Shaha, and Bilal's mother Fazi a lot. Somehow, she realised that sadness had entered into their lonely hearts. She comforted her husband by constantly nagging him about his silences. She picked up petty squabbles with her husband and daughter-in-law to keep the members of her family sane. She hated it when there was silence around and when no one uttered any word for hours together. At times she confided in Sridar and secretly told him not to leave them alone in this condition. All she wanted was to see the family members talk normally to one another.

'Do you remember the day when Sheikh Abdullah died? Millions had joined the funeral procession. You also attended it,' she said to her husband, trying to make him remember and talk.

Mahanandiu pretended to remember and smile.

As days progressed, Mahanandju's memory became more and more fragmented. He narrated the events which no one knew or remembered ever happened in his life. Darkness invaded his days. Darkness descended like a plague and tore every ray of light that shone in his heart and soul. Nothing that his wife said and did was able to change this state. Somewhere deep in her heart, she knew that this was irreversible. The man who always sat cross-legged for hours while doing nothing in the living room, had started to walk with a stoop. Although he did not complain of tiredness, he spent most of the time lying down on the floor.



Sridar became passionate about his writing. He dabbled in both prose and poetry, and sent his stories for publication in the Sunday supplement of the local English Daily. Reading his own stories in print ignited his passion. He took typing lessons at a typing institute, hoping to use the typewriter someday.

Tulmul read Sridar's poems. They planned to start a literary association in the town and send their writings to the editor of the English Daily.

'Who are these poems for, Sridar?' Tulmul asked him when he read some of the love poems Sridar had written. 'There must be someone. It is impossible to write if one has not experienced love and the pangs of separation.'

Sridar evaded an answer. He talked about the books he planned to borrow from the library and read. The books had gathered dust. Many pages had been devoured by silverfish and termite. Some books had never been opened ever since they had been placed on the shelves. As a result, the pages

had stuck inseparably to one another, refusing to part even after being exposed to sunlight.

'I wish I could pocket the entire library and take it home,' Sridar thought.

Rosie did not notice Sridar for long, till one day she saw Tulmul smoking.

'Reading a play. Borrowed a copy from Sridar. I feel like reading it aloud and enacting some of the scenes,' said Tulmul.

'What is it about?' Rosie asked.

'Waiting! What else?'

'And what is this smoking all about?'

'Bliss! Sridar and I plan to join the gypsies soon,' he joked.

'And do what?'

Tulmul took a deep puff and said, 'Fall in love and know life.'

Rosie studied with Tulmul in the college. Her father was a Colonel in the Army and posted at the army cantonment. They were from Jammu. Sridar had seen Rosie many times in the college botanical garden.

Sridar and Tulmul loitered in the streets of the town, discussing books and reading their writings to each other. Rosie desired to meet Sridar when she read his poems published in the Sunday supplement of a daily. The first time they met was when Rosie invited Tulmul to the army cantonment, a fifteen-minute drive from the civilian area of the town. Tulmul got Sridar along with him. Sridar did not mention that he had seen Rosie many times in the town and had always wanted to talk to her.

Rosie was idealistic and brave in her attitude towards the world. She found Sridar's rakish nature interesting. In an instant, she dismissed Sridar's claims of being akin to the rustics.

'These dreams are just idle dreams,' she said to Sridar. 'Realising one's dreams calls for supreme sacrifices.'

Their first conversation was about books. Sridar quoted from many writers. He talked about the fictional characters and their exploits in the world they lived in.

'I believe in sinning and repenting later. I believe in following the heart and in doing wild things. One must crush and annihilate one's reason,' Rosie said.

'Who can decide what is moral and what is immoral?' Sridar said stealing his friend Pamposh's lines.

'What you say is what you have read in the books. Books are liars. What have you done so far to be a lover of life?' Rosie asked.

Sridar and Tulmul walked back home.

'Rosie is a rebel. She almost ran away from her home once. She is mad and loves to experience what lies beyond the false veil of reason,' Tulmul revealed.

Rosie was in love with a boy who lived in the town. His father was a local businessman who owned a brick kiln some fifty kilometers from the town. Unrequited love had made Rosie a rebel. She had even expressed her love to the boy. Baderkote was not a town where such things would go unnoticed. People had started talking about them. The boy could not continue the relationship with her owing to his father's reprimands. He stopped meeting her. Rosie was relentless in separation. She hoped that one day her love for the boy would make him as rebellious as her. Unruffled by the gossip in the town, she

continued to wait for the boy to show up in the park so that she could speak to him.

Rosie confided in Tulmul and Sridar. When she was with Tulmul, they talked about Sridar. Tulmul and Sridar talked about her when she was not with them. When they were all together, they talked about life, suffering, loneliness, music and love. They shared their dreams.

One winter Sridar started to grow beard. He stopped reading.

'I want to become a character of a book I read long back,' he said to Tulmul. 'For a month I will neither shave nor come out of my room. I will bury my soul in someone's scent. I will prepare for the journey like the Lamas of a secret Ladakhi tribe who prepare for years to partake *Shinkiyesh*, a secret substance, to enter the state of being no one among us has ever ventured.'

Sridar talked about a tribe of whom he had heard from someone. The tribe lived clandestinely at a distant monastery in the higher mountains of Ladakh. The men were believed to live well even after a hundred years or more. There was no instance of illness and disease in the tribe. Once a woman from a European country visited Ladakh and lived in a monastery there for many months. Her aim was to assimilate the local culture, learn the language and go in search of the legendary tribesmen and carry home a baby born of their blood.

After many months the woman finally succeeded in establishing contact with some local Lamas who had access to the secret tribe. She wanted to know the secret of their longevity and how they were able to live a life devoid of any illness and depression. She had heard of *Shinkiyesh*, the mysterious substance used by the members of this tribe.

No one knew the truth about Shinkiyesh. Was it a herb or a drug? Was it derived from a plant or an animal? One could partake the essence only once in a lifetime. And she had heard that one had to prepare for the day when one could consume it. This preparation would take many years. Some men and women had to wait a lifetime before taking a dose of Shinkiyesh. Once it entered their bodies, it led to a higher state of being called 'stillness'. It was like a final rest of the soul and the stillness of the body. Administering Shinkiyesh was a secret ritual followed by the tribesmen when they attained the right age.

One had to be ready for it. The preparation did not involve any spiritual or physical hardship or sacrifice. It did not involve any renunciation or any meditation. But the preparation involved confining oneself in a dark room in the monastery and indulging in some conversations with one's companion. Sometimes the confinement would last months, and even years.

Shinkiyesh was almost invisible. The elder tribesmen held a needle close to the eyes of the person. Shinkiyesh rested on the tip of the needle. The arcane ritual took days. One had to concentrate on the tip of the needle and feel the presence of Shinkiyesh. Only those who had experienced this sacrament knew how to concentrate and for how long. Some elders acted as tutors. It involved a person's release from the cycle of time, as we know it. Every moment became eternity. One had to master Time. Finally, the elder would hand over the needle to the person, who would then prick the tip of his tongue with the needle for Shinkiyesh to enter the veins and mix with the blood. What followed, no one knew.

'Is it possible for us to go in search of this tribe in our lifetime?'
Turner asked in excitement.

'Maybe, someday we will. In twenty years when we are ready. Seventy may be too late!' Sridar laughed.

'What must that state be like? That state of stillness. What visions would one see?'

'No visions, no time, no being, no non-being, no self!'

'Right, just eternal bliss!' Tulmul said.

One evening they walked towards the Link Road near the highway. While talking, they lost track of time. They did not stop walking even at the end of the Link Road. The Link Road led to the Army Cantonment. They let themselves be driven by their wild instinct and decided to walk all the way to the cantonment area. During the conversation the topic changed to love.

'How long have you been in love?'

'Ever since I remember being in love.'

'Have you revealed your feelings to her?'

'I could never do that. Is that necessary? Besides, the time is not right. She is a resident and I am a migrant. She has her own house. I am homeless, an exile. She speaks a different language.'

'Is she the inspiration behind some of your best poems?' Tulmul asked.

They approached the main gate of the Army cantonment. A signboard read: 'Authorised Personnel Only'. Civilians were not permitted beyond this gate. Earlier they had been inside the gates when Rosie escorted them. Rosie had the military pass since her father was a Colonel in the army.

'Let us walk back? We must not go further inside,' Sridar said.

'Just a few more yards! Remember the tennis court inside and the bench on the edge of the road? Let us go and spend

some time there. It is dark anyway. No one will see us. And we mean no harm,' Tulmul urged.

They sat on a bench. The smell from a nearby bush was intoxicating.

'Someday, I will lay bare my feelings to her,' Sridar said. 'I am not just ready right now.'

'Time will fly Sridar. Days will sift from our hands like sand.'

'I have never spoken to her,' Sridar said unfolding a sheet of paper. 'Looking at her from the terrace is good enough to experience love. I like to believe that she looks at me too.'

Sridar recited a few lines from a poem he had written:

*The words she utters,
the dreams she sees,
the things she touches
are not mine.*

*The song she sings
is strange,
unknown.*

*The land she rests her feet on
does not belong to me.
But the shadows that fall here
are ours.*

All of a sudden two military guards emerged from a bunker and confronted Sridar and Tulmul. They were taken to a room in an office adjacent to the tennis court.

Tulmul remembered that the tennis court stood next to the residence of the Commanding Officer of the military cantonment. He thought that they might be let off with a warning.

Sridar's beard and Tulmul's unkempt appearance had given rise to suspicion. Sridar wore a red Pashmina shawl, which his mother had given him. He always wore it when he stepped out of the house for a long walk. The red of the shawl reminded him of the girl he loved secretly. The boys were made to wait for fifteen minutes. The room was bare with just four chairs, a table and an overhead bright bulb emanating yellow light. Tulmul and Sridar got worried. Two plainclothesmen entered the room and sat on the chairs.

'Remove your shawl.'

'Boys, what are your names?'

'Where are you from?'

'What were you doing near the tennis court? Do you have any valid identification or any authorisation?'

'We are from the civilian area in the town,' Sridar said. 'We did not know that we were in a restricted area. We were just talking!'

'Who sent you here? What was your motive?'

At this point, Sridar and Tulmul thought that they had been mistaken for some militants – conducting a recce of the military area.

'Sirs, we are college students. If you wish, we can tell you about our teachers. We are Hindus,' Tulmul blurted in desperation.

The responses of Sridar and Tulmul did not satisfy the two men, who were seasoned interrogators.

'Why did you enter this area? We need to know everything,' one interrogator asked.

The interrogation lasted for more than an hour. The two interrogators were joined by another person in military uniform,

who did not speak at all during the question-and-answer session.

With each passing minute Sridar and Tulmul grew impatient and worried. It was well past nine in the night. It would take them another hour to walk back home if they took the short route from the Link Road. The last bus to the city from the bus stop at the army cantonment left at nine.

'Sirs, how can you suspect us of any mischief? We are victims of terrorism ourselves,' Tulmul pleaded.

'We are migrants from Kashmir,' Sridar added. 'Please, do not mistake us for terrorists.'

Finally, sensing that there was no end to the interrogation and that this could go well into the night till the interrogators satisfied themselves and established the truth, Tulmul revealed that his father worked for the Military Engineering Services. This was his last option to escape further interrogation and, possibly, any physical punishment, which would have been the last resort for the interrogators. Somehow, he feared for his father's reputation and did not want to embarrass him. Being a civilian himself, his father would have to request some of his friends in the military to secure the boys' release from the interrogators. He requested the interrogators to send someone to his home to fetch his father, who could vouch for their innocence.

Half an hour later, Tulmul's father arrived. He hid his anger and anxiety. The interrogators spoke with Tulmul's father outside the room, and moments later set the boys free with a warning.

'This is how militants are interrogated by the military,' Tulmul's father said. 'You need to be careful in future. Never go inside the military area. The military has special powers here.'

The questions posed repeatedly by the interrogators echoed in Sridar's mind for many days.

'Who sent you here? What were you doing? What was your motive?'

'There are no answers to these questions,' Sridar mused while feeling extremely guilty of his act.

Rosie laughed and admonished Sridar and Tulmul when she heard about the incident. She was torn between unrequited love and her friendship with Sridar and Tulmul. She felt as if their friendship was tearing her away from her loneliness and the secret adulation she felt for someone, whom she longed to be with.

Months later Rosie left for Jammu when her father got transferred from the town. She met Sridar for the last time near the tea shop at the entrance of the park. They parted on a sad note. Sridar felt devastated and tormented by a sense of loneliness and directionlessness. He grew more restless at his inability to decide for his future. He dangled between ideas and propositions that were opposite to each other. He derived pleasure in his own contradictions.

Sridar and Tulmul visited Batote, a small village on the Jammu-Srinagar highway, before Tulmul left for Delhi to pursue MBA. They wanted to spend the night in the village inn and get drunk. Srinagar was at a safe eight hours from Batote. On their way back, Sridar felt tempted to board a bus for Srinagar and see his home.

In the last year of his graduation, Sridar received an interview letter. He had passed the written test conducted by the Defence Services. He was to leave for Allahabad.

Lasa received a letter that talked about 'Panun Kashmir', an organisation founded by some Kashmiri Pandits living in exile. Their demand was a homeland for the Kashmiri Pandits; the homeland was to be in Kashmir, comprising the regions of the Valley to the East and North of river Jhelum. The convenor and the members visited many migrant camps and settlements in and around Jammu and the rest of the country. The organisation planned to host a conference in a grand auditorium at New Delhi to take the migrant cause to the political corridors. It was a two-day conference where intellectuals and politicians, sympathetic to the Kashmiri Pandit cause, were invited. The organisation mulled support from those who favoured a homeland for the migrants in Kashmir.

The newspapers had stopped carrying news and reports about the life in migrant camps, unless some politician or an international delegation visited them.

Lasa and Sridar decided to attend the conference. They thought it was a good opportunity to listen to the views of eminent personalities about the woes of the migrants.

In Delhi Sridar met a young man who was a volunteer for Panun Kashmir.

'Have you joined Panun Kashmir? Are you a member of any association?' the man asked Sridar.

'No, I have never given a thought to it.'

'Why? Don't you wish to do something meaningful for your community which is living in exile? Are you not driven to revolt at the way many innocent Pandits were killed and the community banished from their homes by the terrorists?' the man asked.

'I am. I feel the pain. But who do we wage our war against? The militants, the separatist politicians, the Government of

India, or the world that remained silent when we were forced to leave our homes? Who is our real enemy?’

‘You should join us and work for the cause. The movement needs young men like you. We have to keep our culture and tradition alive. We want the world to think of our demands. We need to be given our homeland in Kashmir. Don’t be quiet. Join the movement now.’

‘If we return, will it be forever this time or to migrate again in some years? One migration after another; there must be an end to this cycle. Let this be the last migration. Let us find new roots elsewhere.’

‘How can you say that? We have to let the world know of the injustice done to us. The ethnic cleansing! The atrocities! We have to take our demands to the international bodies. To the United Nations! We are united, in exile, for the first time. We are not mute now.’

‘The world is concerned about only the Muslims and militants in Kashmir! We do not matter.’

‘The world is watching us too. Wonder how long this watch will last?’

The first day of the conference of Pandits in exile was over. The migrants were excited about the prospect of taking the cause to the world. Some of the speeches were mesmerising. People cried as they spoke about their memories of Kashmir. Many Pandits, who had come from different countries, talked about Kashmir and its beauty. A resolution was passed. They unveiled a map of Panun Kashmir.

A gentleman, wearing a tie and a coat and sporting a hat, spoke of his memories of Kashmir during his childhood. He said that he had left Kashmir many years back to do business in the

United Kingdom. He represented a small group of non-resident Kashmiris who lived in different countries outside India.

'I saw an opportunity for myself outside Kashmir and left my home in 1948,' he said. 'Every summer we visited Kashmir with our children. But since 1990, after the eruption of militancy in the Valley, we are afraid of visiting our ancestral home in Kashmir. Our relatives fled and no one stayed behind. Our children miss Kashmir now. In peaceful times, they loved to stay in the houseboats in the Dal Lake and laze in the Mughal gardens. Now, we have to look at other countries for holidays.'

'We have taken up the issue of migration and exile with the governments of other countries,' another gentleman lectured. 'They are aware of your demands and have pledged support to your cause. Migrants need not worry now.'

A politician who attended the conference assured the migrants of taking up their cause in the Parliament. 'Kashmiri Pandits will play an important and decisive role in the future of Kashmir and all its issues,' he confided to a gathering of migrants. 'You need to be patient and hold on to one another.'

Later he told the migrant leaders that Pandits were better outside Kashmir. He confided that the Government of India would use the Kashmiri Pandit card at the right time at the negotiation table to complicate matters if it came to secession. The migrants felt proud of their achievements and at the fact that they were able to convince the politicians.

'After all, you are the original inhabitants of Kashmir,' the politician said. 'We can't let someone else decide your fate. You will return to your homes.'

'We demand our slice of Kashmir, the Kashmir of Reshipeer and Lal Ded,' a newspaper quoted one of the leaders.

At the conference, Lasa met Nancy for the first time after migration. Nancy's husband and Lasa had been colleagues at the school in Kashmir. Nancy was happy to see Lasa in Delhi. She said that she was writing a book.

Lasa had visited their house in Srinagar many times. He remembered that they had built the house two years before militancy erupted, and a year later, they had started constructing an additional storey.

'Your house was lovely. I still remember the beautiful garden. It was the best in the entire locality,' Lasa remarked.

'Fate cheated us. We built the house and didn't get to live in it,' Nancy said.

'Do you know who occupied it after you left?' Lasa asked.

'No. There is no news ever since we left. We are fortunate to be alive. It was hell during the last two days.'

Nancy narrated the details of the last days in her house in Kashmir.

'Two bearded men entered our house one afternoon,' she said.

'I want to talk to your husband,' one of them said while lifting his pheran to reveal that he didn't carry any gun.

'Don't be afraid. We won't harm you or your daughters. Your daughters are like our sisters,' the other man said.

'My husband is not at home. He comes late in the evenings,' I said to them.

'Tell him to send your daughters away,' the man said.

'It must have been frightful for the girls,' Lasa said.

'When my husband came home in the evening, he held a letter in his hand. Someone had dropped the letter in the courtyard of our house. The letter said: "Leave within 36 hours - Hizbul Mujahideen"'

Lasa was reminded of the night when two strangers had knocked at his door.

The woman continued to narrate the account:

‘Our neighbour telephoned us in the night to say that my husband’s name figured in the hit list and that we should leave the next day. We left for Jammu in the morning with just a bank passbook, house papers and some utensils. For almost a month, we stayed in a dingy shop before moving into a rented room. We had spent all our savings in constructing a new storey for our house. To this day, I am thankful to my neighbour for warning us in advance that there was threat to my husband’s life. He saved me from ruin.’

‘Many Pandits had a narrow escape,’ Lasa said to her. ‘Others were not so lucky. I met someone at the conference whose uncle was beheaded in a village. His neighbours were late in informing his family that some militants had planned to kill him.’

‘What happened to the great collection of books in your library?’ Lasa asked.

‘The books were pillaged,’ she said mournfully.

In Delhi Lasa got to know that Ali’s brother Qazi was also in the city. He enquired about Qazi’s whereabouts. Qazi had left a message with someone that he would be at the coffee house at Connaught Place in the evening.

During the day, Lasa met many migrants in the Amar Colony camp. He came to know there that some migrants had been allotted space on the pavements to run roadside stalls so they could earn a living. In the mornings they opened their stalls where they sold household items. Some families earned a living by operating roadside eateries. The wives cooked dishes like Rogan Josh and Dumaloo, while their husbands served them to

the pedestrians at reasonable rates. Everyone kept themselves occupied with something or the other. Only the old depended on the monetary relief. The middle-aged performed odd jobs to support their families. They dreamt only one dream; seeing their children pursue engineering degrees and getting jobs in multinational companies.

Qazi broke down when he saw Lasa waiting at a table in the coffee house. They embraced each other. Qazi was inconsolable as though ridden with guilt. He was in Delhi to meet his nephew, who was in the Tihar Jail awaiting trial. Qazi had brought news of Lasa's old house. He told Lasa that the house had been occupied by the Border Security Force.

'Soon after Pandits left, many of their houses were taken over by the security forces and the military,' Qazi narrated. 'Some houses and temples are still occupied by the mujahedeen and used as hideouts. Bhat's house was razed to the ground by the military, after it was used by the mujahedeen to hurl grenades at the military bunkers. The house is nothing more than a pile of debris now. The Ram Temple is in ruins now after a bunch of Afghan mujahedeen used it as a hideout. Ramesh's house at Safa Kadal is in a shambles. The shells fired by the army ravaged its walls.'

Lasa listened stoically.

'How is life at Yarbala?' he asked.

'Life is not the same any longer for us. We live in constant fear of the gun. I saw young boys of my locality being taken away and killed by the military. Everyone is looked upon as a terrorist. The other day a convoy opened fire at a gathering of mourners near our shop. A child got hurt and later died in a hospital,' Qazi said.

'I heard that the Coffee House near Lambert Lane was set on fire. Is that true?' he asked.

'The Coffee House and the Broadway cinema were set on fire. One by one, all cinema halls were asked to shut down. The wine shops too closed down permanently. Those who are rich go to Jammu over the weekends to get drunk.'

Lasa chuckled. He asked Qazi about Ali.

'Last year, Ali was shot in his leg while leaving a restaurant,' Qazi recounted. 'A commotion had broken out at Dal Gate, and someone shouted from the building, "Run for your lives." Ali saw barricades on the road and boarded a *shikara* to reach the other side of the Dal Lake. The shikara was cramped. It almost capsized. When he reached the other side he felt a bit uneasy. His trousers were wet. He put his hand in the pocket of his trousers and rubbed his fingers to feel the moisture. He burst into a wild laughter when he saw blood ooze from his thigh. He had never seen so much blood. The only time he bled was when his shaving razor cut him in the chin. You know how the sight of blood always made him laugh. "It is the colour," he used to say to his wife. He could not believe that a bullet was lodged in his leg. He thought it happened only in the movies; ordinary people getting shot at on the roadside, just after they have had a good meal. After the incident, he would laugh at everything that happened to him.'

'He could have sent me a message. I would have telephoned him,' Lasa said.

'He told me not to reveal this to you. I suspect he wants to narrate the whole story to you himself and hear you laugh at the incident.'

'I will not let him know that I know,' Lasa quipped.

'You know what he told us when we prevented him from going out in curfew to borrow tobacco from a neighbour's house? He said, "What worse could happen now? I already know how the last breath tastes. And I know the secret. It is a matter worth laughing at."

Qazi laughed heartily. Then he broke down again as he narrated the events which had led to his nephew's arrest by the security forces.

'I came here to meet Nissar, my nephew. His mother weeps for him every day. I cannot bear to see her like this. She does not know if she will ever see her son come out of the jail. Nissar was enticed into the freedom movement by his friends. One day he disappeared from home. He joined a group of young recruits, crossed over the Line of Control for training in a Pakistani camp, and came back after a month. His parents had dreams for him. They wanted him to study Medicine and become a doctor. His parents had never imagined that Nissar would bring a gun home and gain infamy as a gun-wielding militant. When Nissar returned home he was a changed boy. He decided to leave his home and stay with the other freedom fighters. They changed their residence every week. There were strict rules to follow and orders to obey. Once a month he would come home and meet all of us. His mother would pack some mutton for him and his friends. For the first time she saw her son offer namaz five times a day. She was scared that her son would be taken away during an army crackdown. Often, she pleaded with him to abandon the gun and go to his maternal uncle's place in Bombay. Something had happened while he was away. There was a great change in the boy.

'Lasa, at the Tihar jail, I saw women waiting to meet their sons. They did not know how long they were to wait for their

sons to be free. Their lives are destroyed now. I wish they had attained martyrdom while fighting so that their mothers did not suffer every day. Now they languish in dark cells, and die every moment. Their mothers and fathers wait for days to catch a glimpse of them from behind the bars. In the heat of this city, they suffer. Nissar's mother waits for him to return home. His sacrifice will not go waste.'

There were tears in Qazi's eyes as he spoke of Nissar. Lasa listened helplessly.

'So much has been lost. For what Qazi? There will be better days,' Lasa said.

'Is the freedom worth the sacrifice of our boys? Thousands have perished. Hundreds have disappeared.'

'Will Nissar be released?' Lasa asked.

Qazi recounted the story of his nephew's ordeal.

'Nissar had to pay the price for his training in weapons. During his training in a militant training camp across the border, Nissar was abused by the trainers. God knows what all things they did to him there. Nissar cries a lot in his cell. For nights he could not sleep at all. He dreaded his own shadow. Loneliness doesn't let him forget the cruelties inflicted upon him by an Afghan, a trainer and a lover of young Kashmiri Muslim boys. One day Nissar was apprehended by the security forces while hurling grenades at a bunker. They caught him with a bag full of grenades. Since then he has been in jail. There is no hope now.'

Qazi enquired about Lasa's father.

'Old age and exile are killing him slowly. His mental condition is deteriorating. A strange madness has engulfed us Qazi,' Lasa said.

'Sometime back my uncle Abdul Rashid feigned madness so that he could be pardoned by a militant outfit and permitted to live. He had been a member of a political party that did not subscribe to the philosophy of the militant organisations. For years he had done good work for the party. But, one by one, the members of the party were exterminated. Many deserted the party and brought out apologies in the newspapers, so that the militants didn't harm them or their families. "You will die unless you feign madness and allow your wife to announce your mental instability in the neighbourhood. The militants must know that you have turned mad and lost your reason," a well-wisher advised. My uncle laughed, then suddenly became silent. He was overcome with fear. A day later, he feigned madness and remained mad for months to come. It was uncanny how perfectly humour and fear plaited in our lives. Now only madness remains. A brutal madness!' Qazi said.

'God only knows what will happen to good people!' Lasa sighed.

'Will you ever return to Kashmir, Lasa? Will you ever return to your home?'

Lasa pretended to smile. His smile quivered.

'We have found new homes now. Maybe, our children will return to our old homes as tourists and stay in hotels,' Lasa said and held Qazi by his hand. Qazi smiled too. He was happy to see that Lasa had not lost his sense of humour and that he still had the ability to laugh at circumstances.

'Will we ever be happy Lasa? Pandits feel that we betrayed them and that we are responsible for the migration. They think that we are all militants. We don't feel happy without Pandits at all. This does not make sense.'

'Qazi, one day there will be freedom for us, freedom from slavish mentality. Not for our generation. Perhaps, for generations to come! Till that time, let us pretend to be happy. Let us smile and rejoice.'

With humour, Lasa and Qazi tried to veil their prejudices.

Dusk had fallen over Connaught Place. An air of sadness filled Lasa's heart as the day came to an end.

The scars of migration wept in Lasa's conversation and in the intermittent silences. There was a partition in his memory of the time spent in Kashmir, a sense of loss of things that belonged to him and of the growing uncertainty.

Qazi embraced Lasa. They parted with heavy hearts.

Before leaving, Qazi slipped a letter into Lasa's hands. It was a letter from Ali.

12 August 1994

Srinagar

Dear Lasa,

Years have passed ever since you left your home. Even today when I walk past your house, I look at the window of your living room and imagine you living there. I wait at the door of your house and knock, hoping that your wife would call you to open the door. The willow tree in the courtyard of your house is still there. I return home without seeing you. The sun looks like a drop of blood in the decaying firmament. Every day I vacillate between hope and fear. Every day I attend a funeral procession of some dead person. The children in our neighbourhood raise slogans about freedom – azadi. Women march on the streets, beat their breasts, defy curfew and mourn their dead children. A father awaits the return

of his only son. A young woman disappeared only to return with wounds and seeds of shame.

Shrieks of the people and sounds of the guns pierce the day.
I don't want to live any more.

The nights are hollow.

Some days back I had a dream. I dreamt that we were at your house. You were reading passages from a book. When you opened the window, it was snowing outside. The crows were all lined up on an electric wire. The kangris kept us warm. The beautiful snow blanketed all the dirty drains in the street. A child from a neighbouring house made tiny footprints on the snow.

My wife still talks about you. Ever since her younger brother Hamid was killed by the militants, she does not allow me to venture out of the house. She thinks that I am the next. She pines for the old days to return, for normalcy to return. She is not able to bear Hamid's absence. Hamid did not listen to the militants. They did not even spare a devout Muslim like him.

Lasa, I remember your words that we must remain mad in order to be sane. What are we fighting for? What are we living for? What are we dying for? The laughter of the mad woman near your house pierces the day. She laughs at me. Waiting for your homecoming in sensible times,

Yours,

Ali



Sridar boarded a train for Allahabad. This was his first ever train journey alone. He did not sleep all night. He was anxious. The

days were going to be tense and stressful. He was to take an interview for a short service commission with the Indian army. The results of his final year graduation examination were still undeclared. He hated the chaotic world; a world bereft of love and leisure, a world ridden with fatigue and ugliness.

Sridar met young men and women from different cities and towns, who had converged in the town in search of jobs. Sridar knew that it was not easy for him to be selected. Others, who were with him, were no less talented and passionate about the job. But Sridar was alien to a life of discipline and hard work. He had never cared to hone his skills which would make him street-smart. For him laziness and a carefree attitude were virtues. He had realised that life was not about running after the material and mundane things. The three years in Baderkote had made him an outsider, a recluse. Seeing himself live and survive as a migrant made him believe in the transience of things. Beauty was what he pursued. Love was what he desired. But he found himself, helplessly, aiming to get a job.

Sridar spent six days in Allahabad. On the morning of the last day, the list of the selected candidates was pasted on the notice board of the building in which he had appeared for an interview. His name was not there. Only two candidates had been selected. He spent the last two days visiting places of tourist interest. He was not dejected.

At noon he set off for Sangam, the confluence of the two great Indian rivers, the Ganga and the Yamuna. On the banks of the Ganga, boys posed as tour guides and begged the foreigners to hire them as guides for a paltry sum of five rupees. A distance away, boatmen operated boats to the holy Sangam, the point where the two rivers converged. Men, women and children from India sat in the boats to immerse their hands

in the confluence. Many people took a dip in the waters they considered *holy*, and capable of washing away sins. Nearby, smoke from the flaming pyres wafted in the air and ascended upwards toward the sky. Some men begged for alms to buy firewood for cremating the dead they brought from their villages. Those who had no money to cremate the dead flung the corpses into the river to be ferried by its waters.

Sridar asked one of the boatmen to ferry him to the middle of where the waters of the two rivers met. He watched the bosoms of the two rivers collide gently and intertwine in a holy dance. In the short moment he imagined what it would be like to drown in the confluence, be taken away into the ocean of nothingness. He longed to immerse his desires and passions into the rivers. He wanted to experience freedom, even if, for a brief moment.

When he disembarked from the boat, a young boy came and said, 'Sir, would you like to have a guide? I know all the places you would find interesting. Please sir, hire me. My charges are just a packet of biscuits and five rupees a day.'

'How old are you?' Sridar asked.

'I am fourteen.'

'Don't you go to school?'

'I do. I study in class eight. During my holidays, I work as a guide. There are great places for me to show to the tourists. Besides, guides like me don't come by so cheap. I can also take you to Benaras, and then from there we can go to Sarnath. I know all the places here and I can tell you stories about them. Stories about the ancient ghats of Benaras and stories about Gautama Buddha!'

'I need to buy a pack of cigarettes. Do you know any place from where I can get boiled eggs?'

'Yes sir,' said the boy, happy to know that Sridar showed interest in employing him as his guide for the day.

'My name is Raghav. We can start for Benaras tomorrow morning. You can meet my brother in the evening. Do you like music? I can take you to a concert of live music.'

They met again in the evening. Raghav took Sridar to a music school.

'You will be happy to meet my brother,' Raghav said. 'He is a musician. He plays upon the violin. Our grandfather played upon many musical instruments. He had learnt music from a renowned guru in Benaras. I play upon the flute.'

Sridar felt excited at the prospect of meeting the violinist. Raghav took him to an old building. It looked like a government school.

'My brother teaches music to kids in this school. Wait here in the courtyard. Let me go inside and see if he can come down. The classes are on.'

Sridar waited for Raghav to return to the courtyard. He did not return for some time. Sridar decided to see the classroom for himself. Music from different musical instruments emanated from the classroom. For a minute Sridar was puzzled. The music was a bit jarring to the ears. Soon it turned into a wild cacophony. The tunes of the violin fell out of sync with the beat of the tabla and the drum.

Sridar looked inside the classroom. Something struck him and set him thinking. The children inside the room played several instruments. An old man, a music teacher, sat in a chair and played along. Soon Sridar realised that the music school was for the mentally challenged children.

Raghav ran towards him.

'My brother is teaching this time.'

Raghav's brother ran errands for the music teacher of the school. He was older than Raghav by about ten years. Raghav told his brother that he would go to Benaras the next day. He shook his brother's hand, plucked a string of the violin he held under his chin, and patted his shoulder. His brother smiled a broken smile and ran the bow on the strings of the violin. The notes of his violin drowned in the musical cacophony of the other instruments played by the children.

Sridar returned to his hotel in the evening. He felt that something from the river had permeated his being and his soul. He felt a sense of freedom. He wondered if Benaras held such secrets.

The next day Raghav waited for Sridar at the bus stop. He carried a bamboo flute with him.

'It is mine. I will play upon it when we reach Benaras!' Raghav said.

Raghav and Sridar boarded a train to Benaras and stayed at a lodge in the city. They visited the ghats in the evening and attended the prayers of countless devotees. Nearby, a man taught swimming to children in one of the bathing ghats. A signboard read: Learn Swimming – Rupees Ten.

Raghav spoke a lot about Sarnath, the place where Buddha delivered the sermon. They visited Sarnath in the evening. Raghav narrated the history of the place. He narrated stories about Buddha.

'Where have you learnt all this? You seem to know all the history with the dates and names?'

'I read a history book and crammed the historical events.'

Sridar was amazed to listen to Raghav's commentaries. Raghav shared some stories from the Buddhist mythology. After seeing the place, both Sridar and Raghav sat under a tree and smoked cigarettes.

'Where are you from? Do you have a river near your house?' Raghav asked.

Sridar was struck by the irony of the question. He didn't know what to say. He struggled for words. There was no answer to Raghav's question.

He wanted to say, 'I am homeless, a migrant.'

Somehow, he answered, 'I left my river far behind at a place which was once my home. The river is somebody else's now.'

He struggled to utter the words and express his feelings to Raghav. As he stammered with his answer he remembered the deep murmuring of the river by his old house at Yarbala.

'This is for you,' Raghav said as he handed over a flute to Sridar. 'Play upon it when you are lonely. Play upon it when you visit the river near your house.'

'Thank you and good bye!' Sridar said and whisked a fifty-rupee note into the pocket of Raghav's shirt.

They parted with heavy hearts. Sridar took a train back to Delhi. The train stopped at many places. At each place labourers, along with their families, boarded the unreserved compartment. Children cried for water as the hot sun made them thirsty.

Sridar was parched. Delhi was six hours away. As his thirst grew he fell asleep. He dreamed a dream. In the dream he sat on the verandah of a house in Kashmir, and saw his mother and grandmother make apple jam in large copper vessels. It was summer. He sorted the apples according to their colour. There were the red ones and the dark red ones. Big baskets full of freshly plucked apples dotted the courtyard of his house. Nearby hundreds of apple trees dotted the entire village.

Sridar's grandmother fried slices of *nadru* for Sridar when he returned home. Sridar's homecoming always made her joyous. Sridar spent the first few days inside his house. He was too lazy to go out of the house. There was no one waiting for him. Tulmul and Rosie were in Delhi. There was no news of them. Some of Sridar's classmates from the camp college were still around. During his visit to the college, Sridar met a few of them roaming in the corridors of the college. One of them was happy to meet Sridar. He wanted to wish him well for his future pursuits. Sridar knew this boy, as they had attended some classes together. He looked a little old for his age.

'So what are your plans now? I read your poems published in the daily. Are you going to become a writer?' he asked Sridar.

Sridar smiled and was happy that the boy was trying to strike a conversation after all these years.

'I would love to write. Everyone here is leaving this place in search of a job. Sitting for tests and interviews makes me nervous. Who would employ a lazy man like me?' Sridar mocked.

'Now what?'

'I will read the *Employment News* every week and apply for some jobs here. If nothing works out here, I will go to Delhi and take up a course in journalism or architecture.'

'What do you see for yourself?'

The boy fell silent. He looked fondly at Sridar and held his hand.

'My parents are old,' he said. 'I want to stay with them here. We live in the migrant camp. If I am lucky, I should get the job of a clerk in some company.'

He continued describing the condition of his family in the tent and spoke about his innermost desires.

'Life is good at the camp. We have nothing to lose now. Nothing that can be snatched! Near our camp, there is a field where some residents grow vegetables. It resembles the kitchen garden we had in our house in Kashmir. The persons who tend the saplings seem very happy. I long for such a happy life.'

The boy's words struck Sridar. The boy summed up the purpose of his existence in a few simple words. Sridar felt as though the boy had stolen his words and lines.

Mahanandju spent most part of the day holding a pack of cards in his hand. Lasa kept him occupied with the cards. He taught him how to arrange the cards in their order. Sridar saw more changes in Mahanandju. Mahanandju talked about Chaman Lal. Sometimes, he referred to Chaman Lal as 'the great dictator of Kashmir' and at other times, he called him names. Sometimes, he called aloud for Chaman Lal as though he were their neighbour.

'Who is Chaman Lal?' his wife would ask irritably.

'I want to go and hear Chaman Lal talk. He is going to deliver a lecture at the Polo Ground today.'

'Stop talking about Chaman Lal.'

'Chaman Lal will betray us all. May lightning strike him and knock him dead!'

Sridar fondly remembered how Mahanandju used to ask him which class he studied in. He used to ask the same question every month. Sridar remembered the question and wanted his grandfather to offer him the usual advice again and again.

'Study the Arts. There is no sense in Sciences and Mathematics.'

Mahanandju spent the days all by himself. He did not leave the house. Lasa did not allow him to step out of the house for fear of losing his way. He knew of another Pandit Thakurani whose

father too had become delusional owing to mental trauma and his inability to cope up with the alien surroundings and loss of his land. On several occasions, the old man lost his way back home and was found sitting for hours on a bench near the bus stop.

Sridar listened to Mahanandju's narratives for hours. Mahanandju talked about Chaman Lal and how he swayed emotions of the people with his fiery speeches. Sridar was sad to see his grandfather lose his memory and grip on reality. Lasa knew that his father's condition would deteriorate with each passing day. His father had slipped into a distant world where he was a child.

'I want you to be the old *you*,' Sridar prayed silently as he looked into the vacant eyes of his grandfather.

A day before Sridar was to leave for Delhi to take an entrance examination, he decided to walk past the house of the girl whom he secretly loved. He had a feeling that he might not be able to catch a glimpse of her. Many thoughts entered his tired mind. Love, madness, fear, desire . . .

As he walked past the girl's house, Sridar looked towards the terrace where she often spent her evenings. The window was closed. He did not know if she was in her house or not. There was no way of knowing this. He did not wish to know. He only yearned to look at her one last time before he left his home.

The evening grew weary. There was no one with whom Sridar could share his thoughts. He walked past the houses along the Long and the Short Street, the vegetable market and the Link Road.

As he walked back towards his home, he met one of his neighbours.

'I heard you are leaving for Delhi soon Sridar.'

'Yes, I intend to appear in some examinations and apply for some jobs there.'

'Why not join my business?' the man asked.

Sridar smiled.

'Thank you. If I don't get a job, I will join you. Do keep a place for me in your business.'

'You Kashmiri Pandits will never try your hand at business. Why do you want jobs only? Anyway, do consider my proposition.'

Sridar left for Delhi with a heavy heart. He had applied for a course in film-making. He pinned all his hopes on this course. And he hoped to be selected. Candidates came from across the country. Many came from reputed schools and colleges.

Sridar came with sketches and incomplete writings. He had faith in his ability to imagine the impossible, to recreate both fantasy and reality. He believed in the honesty of his writings.

He thought he did well in the test. He left the result to destiny.

Later, Sridar loitered on the roads of Delhi. He waited impatiently for the results of the examination he had taken. Hope did not desert him. Meanwhile, he applied for different jobs in newspaper offices involving writing. When people asked for samples of work, he showed his poems and essays. He even offered to work free for the first few months, till the employers were satisfied with his work. Luck did not favour him. Some people were sympathetic towards him. Others advised him to write more and get published in national papers. But they offered no job, no hope, and no promises.

Anonymity did not bring any good fortune, after all.

After a week, results of the examination were declared. Sridar's name was not in the list. He read the names twice, thrice, many times. At last he resigned to whatever luck fetched him. He felt dejected. Once again he had nowhere to go. He had to begin the search all over again.

That evening Sridar walked alone on a bridge. A dull grey evening cascaded on a dried-up river bed. The sound of the speeding vehicles rose and ebbed intermittently. Across the pavement a group of street urchins bathed in a pool of water. Children with sullen faces limped towards the cars at the traffic light, begged and tried to evoke pity and compassion. None of the car windowpanes rolled down. The children kept chasing the cars. A child ran into the middle of the traffic intersection with colourful balloons.

'Fifty paise a balloon! Three for a rupee!' he shouted.

Sridar looked from the bridge. The river of sand and gravel stood still. He remembered how he used to look at the river flow quietly under the bridge near his old house in Srinagar.

The shadows disappeared one by one. The street lights illuminated the pavements.

Sridar lit a cigarette and leaned against a pillar at a bus stop. He did not know whether to board a bus or to continue walking. Darkness signalled the death of another weary day, a day which was futile and purposeless.

'The day need not have existed at all,' Sridar thought.

He decided to stay in Delhi and begin life anew.



Three



Sridar found accommodation in the migrant camp set up at New Delhi. His roommates were migrant bachelors who worked in small companies in the city. Some were engineers and others did odd jobs in courier companies, brokerage houses and television networks. They dined together when they got back from work. They took turns at the daily chores; chopping vegetables, boiling rice, washing the utensils, and sweeping the room. Conversations were centered on Kashmir, politics, migration, weather, and ways to earn more money. Their parents lived in migrant camps and rented houses in Jammu. Every month the men sent money to their parents.

Sridar got a part-time job with a filmmaker who made documentaries for a television network. The film company was shooting a film on terrorism. After reading Sridar's writings, the filmmaker entrusted him with the job of rendering Kashmiri scripts into English. He paid Sridar two thousand rupees a

month. Sridar was part of a team which worked during nights in the studio.

Working on film scripts gave Sridar immense satisfaction. The scripts he worked on dealt with militancy, terrorism and the countless people who had either disappeared from their homes or gotten killed. There were plenty of documents, old newspaper reports, handwritten accounts, texts of interviews, posters and pamphlets published by the militant organisations for Sridar to read and sift through. They had shot some scenes at the migrant camps in Jammu. The scenes shed light on the pain of the migrant community living on the edge. The documentary portrayed the social, cultural and economic deprivation that had set in.

The process of film-making intrigued Sridar. The filmmaker decided to use one of Sridar's poems in a sequence. Sridar was ecstatic.

Lenin worked as a part-time assistant to the filmmaker. He was originally from Kerala. His father was a great admirer of Lenin, and also an activist during his college days, hence his son's name. Lenin too had been active in politics while studying at the university. Cinema and literature were his passions. Lenin introduced Sridar to the world of movies. He encouraged him to become a member of film clubs in Delhi, and also take up a part-time course in film-making. When he was not working on his project, he was watching a movie, going through the film books and reading biographies of great filmmakers. Lenin aspired to be a filmmaker.

'I am working on a script. Once it is ready, I will show it to you,' Lenin said to Sridar.

He wanted Sridar to help him with the script.

'It is going to be a long script. I will need you to polish it,' Lenin added.

'I shall wait for that day.'

Lenin helped Sridar obtain admission in an institute offering a part-time course in filmmaking. Sridar attended the classes thrice a week in the mornings, and worked on his project till late in the night. He accompanied Lenin to the film shows. Together they enjoyed watching films from different countries. Sridar's love for films grew deeper as he read about the filmmakers' lives, their experiences, their struggles and their passions.

He imagined himself as a character in a film, travelling through many generations; generations that were lost in time. He saw himself transported from one dimension to another. He dreamt of sequences of a film he secretly desired to make. The scene which appeared many times in his dreams was that of trucks carrying thousands of Pandits, fleeing their homes. In his dream he heard the laughter of Tota, the mad girl.

Lenin and Sridar became good friends and spent the weekends reading books. Lenin's readings were too deep. To him reading a book was sweat and perspiration, blood and toil, not just enjoyment and relaxation. He read some books over and over again. And he discovered something new about a character, a scene or an event. He read about the authors too; he read about the times they lived in, the difficulties they faced, the loves they shared and the desires that throbbed in their hearts. Sridar was a lover of stories. He read novels for the beautiful journeys undertaken by the characters; the journeys which led them to their discoveries through their spiritual and intellectual transformation.

'You have not understood the character at all Sridar. The father's educational upbringing and religious views made him

intolerant toward his own foster son,' Lenin said to Sridar, when they argued about an event in a novel both of them had read.

Sridar did not care about the debate. But Lenin wanted to prove a point. They argued the whole night. Mostly, Lenin talked and Sridar listened.

Sridar first met Walrus in one of the afternoon classes on film appreciation. It was the summer of 1997, the last lecture of the course. The speaker had begun delivering his lecture when Walrus knocked at the classroom door.

'Is this introduction to realism sir?' he interrupted.

'No,' the speaker said, 'I offered that course last year.'

'Which year is this? Isn't it 1996?' Walrus enquired.

The students had named him 'Walrus' because of his walrus-like moustache. He was a sculptor and aspired to make it big in the world of artists. Years later, he eloped with the daughter of a famous theatre artiste and settled in Paris.

'Sorry, I am late by a year. Allow me to sit sir.'

Walrus sat in a chair at the back and instantly fell asleep. The professor noticed Walrus snoring. He paused and asked a student to wake him up from his sleep. Walrus opened his eyes slowly and yawned.

'I have a question sir,' he said raising his hand. The students in the class heard the question and swallowed their breath. The professor carried on with the lecture and Walrus went back to the world of dreams.

Walrus wanted to know about the Tantra philosophy. He was in search of books on Tantra and someone had told him that Sridar belonged to Kashmir.

'Aren't you from Kashmir?' Walrus asked Sridar.

'Yes, I was born there.'

'What a beautiful place!'

'No more as lovely as it used to be when I was a kid.'

'Do you go to Kashmir in holidays?'

Sridar wanted to evade an answer. He didn't want his answer to remind him that he couldn't go to Kashmir anymore even if he wished to. Somehow, he tried to mask his torment by stating the bitter truth.

'I don't live there now,' he sighed. 'We migrated from there in 1990. My parents live in Jammu now. I visit them sometimes.'

'What about your house in Kashmir?'

'We had a huge house there. My father got to know that a family occupied it after we left.'

'Terrible things happen in our country,' Walrus said. He narrated his own experience. 'I heard about how the Pandits were forced to leave their homes for other parts of the country. I know the pain of homelessness. My parents and I left our village in West Bengal many years back. The whole village drowned. The floods destroyed nearly everything. Our house disappeared in hours. For days we survived without any shelter. I was a small boy then. I still have memories of the terrible days. We waited for help to arrive. No one from the government stepped forward in time to rescue the orphaned children from disease, hunger and death. When the authorities arrived days after, the storm had passed. It was too late for them to salvage anything. By that time many families had perished, and only a handful had managed to survive.'

Sridar did not say anything. He listened, lit a cigarette, and offered one to Walrus.

'Shabeer wants to see Kashmir free,' Walrus said, referring to a classmate. 'He thinks it was a conspiracy by the Government

of India to get Pandits out of Kashmir, so that the army could fearlessly unleash terror, quell the freedom movement and kill those who stood for it.'

'Pandits were thrown out of the Valley. Muslims succeeded!' Sridar said.

Shabeer Ahmad was a Kashmiri Muslim, who also attended the course. He was the only one with whom Sridar spoke in Kashmiri and shared Kashmiri jokes. He had asked Sridar to accompany him to Kashmir during summer holidays. Sridar had thought about Shabeer's offer, which seemed tempting to him. But he had declined.

Shabeer was pro-Pakistan in school. But when his younger brother died in a landmine blast while returning from his school, he turned pro-independence. His brother wanted to become a doctor. Shabeer blamed the Indian security forces for his brother's death. He thought that they had forcibly taken over their village, converted it into a fortress, and laid landmines for the militants to be blown to bits. The village people were treated with utmost disrespect. Many were humiliated by parading them on the streets for identification. After his brother's death, Shabeer's parents sent him to Delhi to study.

His father wrote him a letter every month. In the letters his father never wrote about their village and the condition in which they lived. The letter mostly carried advice and blessings for Shabeer. One day he received a letter from his father informing him of Arif's death in a shootout between the army and the militants near the Line of Control. Arif was their neighbour's son and had joined a militant outfit. The army had laid an ambush for the militants who hid in a gojar hutment in a village near the LoC. Arif was hit by a bullet in the chest and died instantly.

Shabeer always discussed politics and Kashmir. He dreamt of an independent Kashmir. 'I don't believe in armed rebellion,' he used to say when Sridar talked of Kashmir. He talked about ideology and a separatist resistance driven by revolutionary ideas.

'Think of Kashmir as an independent country!' he said to Sridar. 'We will have our own embassies across the world and other countries will have theirs in our Capital. Our universities will be famous. We will welcome Indians. We will have foreign relations with both India and Pakistan. And most importantly, we will have our own cricket team, which will beat both India and Pakistan. It will be a Kashmir in which Muslims and Pandits will live in harmony like before.'

Sridar and Shabeer met regularly in Walrus's room. Walrus had many friends from the university. All of them got together occasionally and smoked *charas*. Walrus carved small figurines from a block of clay and Shabeer recited Sufi poetry.

On Sunday mornings Sridar went to the university cafeteria to meet Ramesh, whom he had met in the library of the university. While enjoying breakfast at the university cafe Ramesh often said, 'Life is meaningless, but these eggs are delicious.' He used to laugh at everything and blame his failures on the emptiness of life.

One evening Ramesh read a letter he had written for a girl in his class. Through the letter he wanted to express his love. But he kept postponing the mention of love. He wrote about life, theatre, art, suffering, failure, and poetry. Ramesh came from a small village in the south of India.

On one such occasion, the Japanese Cultural Centre at New Delhi screened a film, and this show was graced by a royal guest from Kyoto. The other guests included the Ambassador

of Japan to India and some bureaucrats. Sridar did not have an invitation pass. The guards at the Centre had been instructed not to allow any uninvited guest. Sridar was unrelenting. He decided to be in at any cost, and somehow sneaked into the hall.

'I broke the barricade in my mind long back,' Sridar proclaimed.

Once inside the hall Sridar remained still and watched the movie. The movie ended with a dream scene, that of lovers making love in a well and cherry blossoms falling all over their naked bodies.

A desire lurked in Sridar's soul. The desire to dig a sword into his heart, film it and then screen it. The desire to film pain and suffering!

Time, dreams and reality became Sridar's obsessions.

'Reality could be expressed as a series of illusory events. How about reality itself as an illusion!' he wondered.

For Sridar life became uncertain. He wanted to discover a way to deal with uncertain truths of this world. He craved happiness. He wanted to know what he desired.

He spent more time reading. After completing his work at the production house, he took time off to read other scripts. He submitted his script and received his remuneration for it. Paucity of money towards the end of the month gave him sleepless nights. He had to cut down on cigarettes.

One afternoon Lenin brought along with him a newspaper clipping and a form. The Asian Buddhist Foundation was organising an essay competition and soliciting entries. There were many prizes to be won. The first prize was a fifteen-day stay at Greece. There were two consolation prizes of twenty-five thousand rupees each and a two-week stay at a hotel in Ladakh.

Lenin persuaded Sridar to participate in this competition. He had read some of Sridar's essays in his notebook.

'There is a good chance that you could win and travel,' Lenin hinted. 'You always wanted to visit Greece and see the ruins there. Didn't you?'

At Lenin's insistence Sridar spent some days in writing an essay. He wrote half-heartedly, but soon found himself getting involved in his writing. Some days after submitting his essay at the office of the Asian Buddhist Foundation, he received a letter stating that his essay had won a consolation prize. The letter also mentioned that the essay would also be published in the forthcoming edition of the journal of the Foundation. Sridar shared this news with Lenin, and they celebrated Sridar's achievement over drinks.

The bus terminus at Delhi bore a peculiar resemblance to a recurrent dream. Sridar sat on the bench at the bus stop, munching a sandwich. He was calm.

The night before, he bid farewell to his roommates and friends. He made several copies of the letter he had received from the Asian Buddhist Foundation. He posted a copy of the letter to his father. His rucksack contained some books, a carton of cigarettes, clothes, his journal, a blanket, his mother's red shawl, his shaving kit, sheets of paper and a letter he had received from his father. He kept the folded letter in a book. He would read it once again in the bus and, mentally, draft a reply.

In the bus he reread his essay. One moment, he liked it. The next moment, he felt like rewriting it. He was doubtful of the beginning and happy with the ending.

Sridar opened his father's letter. The contents disturbed him. In his letter Lasa talked about Mahanandju's mental state and frail health.

As the bus started plying, Sridar read the letter:

Baderkote

Dear Sridar,

After you left for Delhi, a strange vacuum entered my soul. I feel as though every moment is thrust on me like a mountain. I breathe. That is all. Love seems to have fled from me. Desire has deserted me. I look at my reflection in the mirror. I see an old and tired 'me'.

Mostly I attend cremations of migrants. At the crematorium I see unknown faces. Each face is no different from the other. The lines, the wrinkles, the frowns, the smiles! But it feels good to go and see them. I saw some migrants just slip into a deep sleep, while sitting idle or chopping vegetables in their tents. These deaths are like a puppet show.

Some days back I visited my friends at a camp in Jammu. I saw a host of old people there. They seemed to have grown old quickly. Women washed utensils, old people squatted on benches and waited for others to join them. Some young men peddled odd things. They waited for the customers who never came. Even idle passersby didn't stop by the shops. Children played with gravel on the road.

Gurtu lost his father some weeks back. He is a relieved man now. For months his father was bedridden. There were sores all over the body. Gurtu cried when he saw me. He took me to meet some other families living in camps. His neighbours! I met husbands who had lost the love for their wives, and wives who no longer felt the need to hold their husbands' hands. Some couples have not shared an intimate moment ever since they left their homes. Living in tents has turned them into cold humans. They have forgotten to love,

to caress, and to touch. They no longer feel the warmth. They don't wake up to the warm embraces. They live lives devoid of passion, of desire, of craving. They go to bed tired, and wake up exhausted. They huddle in the dusty corners of the tents.

For the migrants 'tomorrow' brings no hope and 'today' is a burden weighing heavy on the souls. There is nothing to look forward to.

Gurtu says he still hears voices from the streets he deserted a lifetime ago. Familiar voices of his neighbours asking him to leave his home! He hears his mother whimper beneath the quilt, wanting to enter her old home. A community is on the verge of extinction. The middle-aged are no longer passionate about life. They crave their share of the monetary relief. Our identity is imprisoned in a ration card. This should change, or else we will be forgotten forever.

Your grandfather rarely talks these days. The doctor says it is Alzheimer's. Anti-depressants help keep him calm. He is slowly losing his ability to distinguish between different objects. He doesn't know his relationship with us anymore. Sometimes, his thoughts wander in a vast universe of diverse thoughts. Sometimes, it is just a frozen thought for hours. 'Home' in Kashmir is what may bring him back. One last look at his room in our old home may give him happiness. He doesn't remember the hymn which he used to recite all the time. Your grandmother enquires about you often and says that you appear in her dreams every night.

I have asked some friends in Kashmir to arrange for a buyer for our house. Why keep the legal papers and keys with us when the house is no longer ours? You will never go back to the house in Kashmir. Perhaps, we can save some money

and buy a small plot of land in Jammu for us to settle down there. We have to pass the time somehow, live a quiet life, grow old and pretend to laugh. But we must remember our ancestors; remind ourselves who we are and where we came from. We must pass on the stories of our ancestors from one generation to another.

You must remember to look back and reflect on our journey. Someday, you will have to search for the shreds of your identity, your essence and your own history.

With unbounded love,

Babuji

Sridar read the letter and folded it back into the envelope. In the morning he wrote a letter and made up his mind to post it to his father from Ladakh.

Dear Father,

Yesterday I read your letter. Your letter gave me strength and courage. The days are dark. The road ahead is hazy.

Some days back I had a dream. In the dream I saw snippets from the past; the past which died before its birth. I saw that we were walking on the embankment and talking about life. You took me to the Head Post Office in Kashmir to see the new stamps that had pictures of monuments, flowers, bridges, people, animals and trees from around the world. I saw the world in a mosaic of colourful stamps. We visited the botanical garden and looked at beautiful plants and flowers. The almond grove haunted me. I tasted half-ripe almonds fallen on the ground. I sat in my room with an excruciating earache. You came and asked me to read verses from a book of poems. Desperate and helpless, I read some lines and the

pain receded, magically. I saw you teach me to ride a bicycle, running behind me, holding the bicycle and then releasing the clasp to see me ride, all by myself. I saw you carrying me on your shoulders to see the frozen Dal Lake in winter. It looked like a glacier, so mirror-like. So pure and so peaceful! Men and women walked hand in hand, fearlessly. Children played football on the frozen lake. Crows dug their cold beaks into the sheets of silvery ice.

When I woke up snippets of the dream still played. They refused to leave. Dreams give me happiness. I want to live in my dreams. Dreams are my true life now. I wander in my dreams.

You have been doing nothing all these days and you wish to spend the days in a quilt. What does your soul go through these days? I tremble and shudder to imagine. I cannot peep into the abyss that you hold in the depths of your heart.

I know all that happened made us stronger. How many people are a witness to life's forbidden secrets? How many know how to laugh even in suffering? How many know how to live and love. You see too deep into the heart of things, into the soul of them. You know the beauty of tears. You taught me to gather the beautiful autumn leaves from the ground and throw them towards the sky. You taught me to be mad. In madness we will be happy. In madness we will hear the song of life and find beauty and love. Be a peasant at heart. Be a woodcutter. Be a shepherd. Let the mystery remain a mystery. Let secrets remain secrets.

Try to listen to your heart. Sometimes, it says things which even you can't hear, let alone the ones who know and love you.

Last summer I saw an old couple sit unruffled outside a canvas tent in the camp. Hot winds had started blowing

fiercely. Children ran amuck and created a ruckus. People around me seemed to complete the chores hurriedly. Some left the chores unfinished and entered their tents. There was dust all over the camp. A strange ennui engulfed me as I searched for some shade. There was none in sight. I fixed my gaze at the old couple. There was a sad quietness about them. The way they looked at each other! The way they exchanged glances! The way they smiled and sighed! It was ineffable. I wish I could read their minds. Then I thought to myself, 'Perhaps, they are making love.'

Hope this letter brings a smile on your lips. Many things remain unsaid. Beautiful things! Those things will sing through their silences for they have music in them.

With unbounded love,
Your son,
Sridar



The route to Leh was picturesque. The view of the barren mountains from the window of the bus ignited a wild passion in Sridar. The whistling wind and the vast nothingness made him pine for love and companionship. He hated to be lonely in such surroundings.

At Leh a young boy welcomed Sridar.

'Welcome sir. My name is Riyaz. I am from Dras and work in Hotel Mountain View,' the boy said.

The boy took Sridar to the hotel. His room was on the third floor and overlooked the barren mountains of Ladakh. Each mountain wore a different colour. There were shades of

blue and grey. The sky was vast and appeared to melt into the horizon.

Sridar opened the window and let the cold air come in. He looked at the mountains and the vast land. He had never seen such emptiness and barrenness. He lost himself in the vast emptiness.

'What a perfect place to die!' he whispered to himself while lighting a cigarette.

He ordered some tea, sat down on a chair and leafed through the pages of an old journal kept in the room. Riyaz sent a cup of *gur gur* tea with *mokh mokh*. Sridar spent the evening sipping the tea and reading about Ladakh.

The next day Sridar explored the town, met some local people and enquired about monasteries he could visit. Riyaz guided him around the place and took him to the heart of the town where he met some families. Sridar was more interested in meeting people who lived far away, those who lived in harmony with nature.

Over the next few days, Sridar met some Lamas in their Gompas, the monasteries. He was received with warm smiles in the Gompas. The young Lamas performed the daily chores assigned to them by the elders. Contentment reigned in the place.

Every Lama he met seemed happy and at peace. No one expressed any anguish, any torment, any fear or any doubt. Prayers kept the Lamas at peace with the world. Sridar thought that peace and happiness were theirs.

'Are happiness and contentment the true goals of life?' he asked a Lama.

The Lama didn't say a word.

'What makes us happy?' Sridar asked once again. 'Freedom from desire! This is what I have read in the scriptures. Can we desire not to have any desires? Would that be freedom? What sets us free?'

The Lama smiled. He held a bin in one hand and was sweeping the dirt from the corridor.

Sridar asked some more questions and expected the Lama to talk to him for some time.

'Is love a desire in itself?'

'Love means no desire. Love is above desire and temptation. Love transcends everything. One must know how to live in harmony,' the Lama said. 'Love is a dot and a no-dot.'

Sridar listened and tried to understand the mystery.

'How will it be when I am no more?' Sridar wondered. 'I am still learning and searching for answers. Some say the path is hard. Some say it is easy. Sometimes I don't feel like coming out of my room. I just read and think and dream. Then, I marvel at the thoughts and the dreams that come to me. When I step out of my room and look at the mountain, I feel light.'

'I don't crave happiness,' the Lama said. 'So, I am always happy. My guru teaches me how to pray and meditate and spend some moments in quietude. He says that if we know how to pray well, the question 'Who am I?' will cease to bother us. I have nothing left to squander.'

'I don't understand,' Sridar said.

'There is nothing to understand. All understanding ceases to exist when we realise our true essence,' the Lama said. He stood up, and started sweeping the floor with a broom. 'Understanding is nothing. As a first step you should learn to walk into a garden of flowers with an empty basket and not pluck any flowers. You should learn to keep the basket

empty, and yet, be able to bring the scent of the flowers home. The path is neither hard nor easy. Somewhere it will rain and somewhere the sun will shine. The wanderer will lose his way. The wanderer must find his own way and walk the same path again and again and find new paths.'

The Lama's real work was to serve at the monastery. His favourite subject was *death*. He wished to understand the true nature of life and death. Sridar asked him if he was afraid of dying.

'I will die peacefully amid the silent tunes of the wind brushing its breasts against the barren mountain. Just the mountain and me. Death is not a state of non-being or a condition. Death is a character which I will play. And I must play the part well. I need to learn the art of enacting the scene and enthral the audiences. I will win them and win their appreciation. That is my reward,' he said to Sridar.

The words struck Sridar. He paused for a while and then felt disturbed, as though the word he searched was stuck in his throat.

'Dream your own dream!' he thought. 'I need to know myself better.'

Every afternoon Sridar visited the monastery to sit on the verandah and look at the mountains. He watched the shepherds with their flock, settled temporarily on one of the slopes. They had built temporary hutments.

'What would it take to join them? Be a member of their family. Live with them,' he wondered.

On certain days some Lamas did not come out of their room at all. They were bound by a code of the monastery. They lived in a room and practised meditation.

'Someday I will take you in the room. You will have to leave all your belongings outside,' the Lama explained.

The books Sridar had brought along adorned the shelf of his hotel room. He had no new ones to read. The library in the monastery housed manuscripts on Buddhism. Many of them were in Tibetan. But he wanted to search for some poetry books. Riyaz suggested he explore the shops selling books and antiques in the marketplace. There were many such small shops in the area where most European tourists sauntered in search of discarded books and charas.

A signboard on one shop read 'The Mountain of Books'. It caught Sridar's imagination.

'The Mountain of Books,' he murmured to himself.

He entered the shop and saw old books and antiques placed on the shelves. Most books had been discarded by the tourists in hotels. There were some old jackets, woollen sweaters, gloves, ash trays and lighters for sale.

Beneath a pile of books Sridar spotted a familiar name - *Where Three Kingdoms Meet*. He picked it up and ran his fingers through the yellow pages. A strange smell, buried deep, emanated from the pages.

'Fifty rupees for this one,' the woman said from behind the curtain.

Sridar looked at the woman. She wore traditional Ladakhi dress. She seemed to be in her forties and had a seductive glint in her eyes.

'Come inside and see the other bookshelf. You may find what you are searching for. I have some music also, on tapes. Buddhist chants! Would you like to see the titles or the catalogue?' she asked. 'Are you a tourist?'

'Yes, a tourist. I am here to enjoy the landscape. I like the name of your shop.'

Her name was Ameira. She offered him some gur gur tea. Sridar spent the afternoon talking about the place and his love of books.

'You can pay me later,' she said.

Before leaving for his hotel, Sridar revealed to her that he loved exploring the Gompas and talking to the Lamas. There were deep mysteries to unfold. Something waited to be unravelled!

'I love the silence of Ladakh. What must it be to be conceived here? What must it be to die in the mountains here?' he asked Ameira.

That evening Sridar thought about Ameira. She had told him that she had been living here for many years and had made Ladakh her home. He planned to visit her shop again to talk to her and know more about her.

Later in the night, he asked Riyaz about Ameira. Riyaz said that no one in the town knew much about her.

'She is a woman without a past,' Riyaz said.

'A woman without a past!' Sridar wondered. He was curious to know more.

'She has been around for many years now, selling small inane things in her shop,' Riyaz revealed. 'She does not talk to anyone in the town. During summers she shuts her shop for weeks together and goes away to the mountains. People say that she came to Ladakh as a tourist many years back and never returned to her home. "This is my home now," she says.'

The thought of leaving Ladakh was quite unsettling for Sridar. He had begun to like the place and understand its magical charm. Moreover, he desired to know more about Ameira.

Some days later, he met Ameira again at her shop. She was reading a book. Sridar mentioned about his visit to the monasteries.

'Would you like to see all the books and antiques?' she asked.

She invited Sridar to her house.

Sridar postponed his departure from Ladakh and decided to spend some more time there and explore the Gompas and the villages. As each day progressed, his friendship with Ameira began to flourish. They met every afternoon at her shop, and in the evenings, walked on the road towards a spot which led to a vast piece of barren land. They talked for hours.

In the beginning, she did not reveal much about her past. Sridar barely talked about his past to Ameira. For Ameira, Sridar was from the plains and on a visit to Ladakh to experience new passions in life and discover his soul, listen to its voice, and find a meaning to his existence.

She showed Sridar books, manuscripts and antiques. She sold some of her possessions to art lovers, who paid her handsomely. She asked Sridar to read an unfinished story she had written.

'Beautiful description of nomadic life! What wonderful calligraphy in English!' Sridar exclaimed when he read the notes.

'It is incomplete,' she clarified. 'I wanted to complete it last winter.'

Sridar was curious to read the entire story.

'Hope to complete it soon. My thoughts wander in different directions. New directions. I have begun to see new characters now,' she said.

She offered Sridar a room in her house during his extended stay at Ladakh. He was tempted to move in her house. After a few days, when Sridar moved in with Ameira, he found hundreds of pages written by her. She was a prolific writer. There were poems, stories and an unfinished novel.

He liked the story about a young girl from England, visiting her grandfather's grave in Kashmir for the first time. Her father was a Kashmiri Muslim doctor, who had married an Englishwoman and settled in England. When the girl visited her grandfather's grave, she asked her father to tell her about her grandfather's life. Her father then narrated the story of his youth to the girl. The story of his childhood in Kashmir; the story of his house, where he lived with his father, mother, uncles, aunts and cousins! The story of how he grew up amid the willows, playing cricket all day and stealing luscious apples from his uncle's orchards. How he used to hide in his father's carpet factory and at times under the silken Pashmina yarn! He had accompanied his father to Calcutta and Bombay to sell shawls and carpets to the rich. On one occasion, he remembered meeting actors from Bollywood to whom they sold Pashmina shawls. And how during summers, his friends and he swam across the deep Wular Lake in Kashmir and pretended to drown, so that people jumped from the embankment to rescue them! The story of pranksters and how he bunked school many times to watch movies in a cinema hall! The story of his going to England to study medicine and never to return home! His daughter cried when she learnt that her grandfather died in loneliness, waiting for his son to return to Kashmir.

The story moved Sridar. He asked Ameira if it was inspired from her husband's own life, or perhaps a snippet from her husband's life in Kashmir. Ameira smiled and picked up a book.

Whenever Sridar asked her a question she did not want to answer, she picked up a book and got engrossed in the pages. Then, she would start a new conversation altogether. She knew the art of concealing her thoughts. For days together Sridar would read silently, while Ameira gave finishing touches to the novel she was writing. The story was inspired by her own life.

Sridar wanted to visit Chushul and stay there for some days. A few days of solitude were what he craved.

'Some evenings in silence! Days without conversations! I have heard much about the solitude there,' he said to Ameira.

'Maybe, we can do this together in Chushul. Chushul would be a great place to write the last chapter.'

Chushul was a few hours' drive from Leh. Sridar had heard of the beauty of the village from the local army personnel who were posted at Leh. They spoke of Chushul as though it were a magical place.

'I want to see the vast emptiness of which I have heard much! I want to be free,' Sridar thought.

Before leaving Ladakh, he spent a day with Ameira in Chushul. They spent the day by a geyser. They discovered deep silences when they looked at the grey clouds over the grey mountains. Time stood still. They felt the evening ooze out of the mountains and engulf them.

Before they left the village, Ameira lifted the veil, even though slightly, from her past.

'I grew up in Yorkshire among three siblings,' she recounted. 'I first came to Ladakh with my husband many years back. My husband was originally from Kashmir, who studied in London. After his studies in London, he took up a job with the United Nations. We met in London during a conference. After our marriage, my husband got posted to Nepal. I left my job as a

researcher and joined him. From Nepal, we travelled to Ladakh on a field trip for some months. In Ladakh, when I first saw the mountains around me, I wanted to disappear behind them. Everything about the mountains was so magical and so alluring. My husband and I spent eight months in the villages in Ladakh, and then he moved back to Nepal. Cholera broke out in the village in Nepal, and he died battling cholera. I could not go back to London. I decided to stay on in Ladakh and continue my life here. After many months of my husband's death, I got to learn that he had been working as a spy. I discovered some papers and notes which were meant for agents he worked for. They told me that he died of cholera. But the last letters which he wrote to me suggested that he might have been poisoned in Nepal. I continued receiving his belongings from time to time. Clothes, books, his research work, and antiques he had collected from his visits to different places in the world. I got letters from the agents he worked with. They offered me a job. Perhaps, to continue the work he did.

'My husband always told me that he would take me to Kashmir. I had seen Kashmir in pictures. I try to find happiness and contentment in the mountains here. The winters are long and cold. I want to be buried here. In my garden! I am free at last.'

Ameira lit a cigarette and took some deep puffs. Sridar held her hand. His hands trembled. His breath quivered. His heart beat fast. In the room Buddhist chants played in the cassette player. Ameira closed her eyes and mumbled some words in Ladakhi. She spoke the lovely words as though she described something intimate to Sridar. Something about the mountains!

Sridar buried a bunch of handwritten notes under the pillow. The notes contained Sridar's poems on his experience

as an exile, as a lover, describing his loves, his imperfections, his dreams, his fall, descriptions of beautiful things; things lost and regained.

Ameira buried her head in Sridar's hands. He put off the lights and reclined against the wall with Ameira's face cupped in his warm hands.

A day before, he had called home and spoken to his father. Lasa had asked him to speak to Mahanandju. The conversation with his grandfather had disturbed him.

Mahanandju had spoken in syllables. His voice had broken in between the conversation. Sridar had asked him about his health and welfare. Mahanandju had asked him about a dog bite.

Sridar thought about what his grandfather had said to him on phone, 'I told you to keep away from the brown dog. It has bitten you now. I could do nothing to stop it. Did it chase you? Offer some bread to the cow in the street and keep an eye on the dog. I hope that the dog was not mad.'

Sridar had listened patiently.

'Perhaps, he saw a dream in which a dog chased you and bit you. And he believed it to be true. Now he only talks about the dog bite. Don't worry. He will forget about this soon,' Lasa had said.

Sridar decided to leave for home. He wanted to see his grandfather and hold his hand and show him that he had not been bitten by any dog.

Sridar remembered the incident of a stray dog from his childhood. A brown dog which used to chase and terrorise him! For years the dog did not allow Sridar to trespass his street. It was the same dog that colonised the street in which they lived. The dog had appeared in his grandfather's dream and bitten Sridar.

On the last day of his stay in Ladakh, Sridar could not sleep. He didn't want to leave. Yet, he was anxious to meet his grandfather. He thought about him and wanted to dream the same dream in which the dog appeared and bit him. He found himself torn between two dreams. He recollected the words spoken to him by the Lama. There was turbulence in him, which he had started to discover. This turbulence made him restless. He reflected on his past and felt a deep void within him. He felt a sense of incompleteness.



Sridar left Ladakh with a heavy heart, keen to be with his grandfather. He kept thinking about what he was leaving behind in Ladakh.

When Sridar reached home, he saw that his grandfather had thinned. He had grown a beard. It was for the first time he had seen him with a beard. Sridar showed his arms and legs to him.

'No cuts and scars. I am fine. The wound from the dog bite has healed.'

Mahanandju inspected his hands, legs and arms and smiled. He felt relieved. Later in the night, he asked Sridar again about the dog bite.

Lasa explained the situation to Sridar.

'He has lost his memory partially,' Lasa said. 'He takes dreams and illusions for real and he confuses reality with dreams. He is beyond any treatment now and his mental condition will deteriorate rapidly. That is what the doctor said. Alzheimer's! We took him to the hospital and stayed there for a few days when you were away. Then we brought him back home. You

know how it can be at the hospitals. The doctors say that we must look after him at home and keep him happy. He is a child once again.'

In the days to follow, Mahanandju lost his appetite completely. He ate only a few morsels. Between morsels, he stopped and gazed at the wall. He forgot to complete his sentences. Gowri cooked his favourite dishes for dinner – turnip, fish and rice. But he did not relish the dishes. People, places and incidents came to him in his dreams, and he narrated the dreams to Lasa. Lasa liked to think that his father had memorised his past which never existed.

Lasa and Sridar tried to engage Mahanandju in conversations about the family.

'You haven't talked to Sridar ever since he came from Delhi,' Lasa said to Mahanandju.

Mahanandju did not say anything.

'Do you recognise him?' Lasa asked again. 'What is his name?'

'Who am I?' Sridar asked him. There was no response. But this time Mahanandju smiled.

Gowri rebuked him. 'Why don't you speak to Sridar? He will leave for Delhi once again if you continue to remain quiet.'

'Who is he?' Lasa asked repeatedly. Finally, Mahanandju mumbled some disjointed words. 'I remember him. He is Baijee.' Baijee was a distant cousin.

'He is Sridar,' Gowri corrected him. Lasa pleaded with Gowri not to cry.

'Which class are you in?' Mahanandju asked Sridar.

With the passing of each day, Mahanandju stopped eating. He became very weak and he was unable to hold on to things. He took to the bed. His skin started to decay. He lost the

ability to recognise people and things. His eyes became grey. The doctor put him on tubes which went into his nostrils and mouth.

Sridar could not bear the sight of his grandfather wither away slowly, get consumed every day, lose a part every day and lose a fragment of his memory every moment. He prayed. Medicines kept Mahanandju alive. Sores appeared on his body. His limbs became stiff.

There were no conversations like before. Only silences! Sridar talked about the things he thought would make his grandfather happy and smile. Mahanandju only smiled. Every morning he woke up, sat silent for hours, went to sleep in the afternoon, couldn't eat, and then stared at the things in the room. The hours that went by were distressful. Lasa kept vigil at night. He didn't sleep. At times he felt the pulse stop and held his breath. Sometimes, Mahanandju slept peacefully. Sometimes, there were deep silences. And sometimes, there was the sound of cumbersome breathing through the endless night!

Mahanandju opened his eyes between fits of dream and memory, while everyone in the family waited for him to fade away. Lasa seldom slept and, somewhere, kept his hope alive. Every moment while attending to his father, he pretended to be happy and brave. Yet, he found himself entangled in a web of defeat and helplessness. His thoughts plaited guilt and love.

It was the rainy season. The air from the ceiling fan was moist. There was dampness all around the room.

Lasa heard Mahanandju wail constantly in sleep.

'Dhanay . . . Dhanay . . .' he moaned. Dhana was his mother Poshkuj's pet name at home. Lasa tried to keep awake. He knew that the end was near. He woke up at midnight and found Mahanandju had stopped breathing. His eyes were open.

In his hand he held a pack of cards. Underneath the pillow, there was a picture of Krishna kept by his wife. Lasa pulled a tube from his father's nostrils and held his hand for a long time. He felt happy to see his father liberated from pain and suffering. He touched his father's forehead. There was still some warmth left.

After Mahanandju's cremation, Lasa and Sridar talked about Mahanandju and remembered him as a simple, loving and caring man, who was difficult to understand. It was a beautiful day. Rain played hide and seek with sunshine.

'I have decided to sell our house in Srinagar. My friend Ali is helping me contact a broker who will find a buyer,' Lasa said to Sridar.

Lasa had telephoned Ali and asked him to help sell the house. Many Pandits had already sold off their houses to Muslims.

Some days later, a Muslim gentleman and his eight-year-old son stopped over at Lasa's place to handover Ali's letter to him. They were on their way to Delhi. The man shared news about life at Yarbala, and also gave Lasa a contact number of the broker who was interested in selling the house to a Muslim family.

Lasa's wife came with tea and biscuits. The eight-year-old said to his father, 'Abba, there is a drop of blood on aunty's forehead.'

'Shut up,' the father howled at his son. 'The boy has not seen any woman with the tilak,' he whispered sheepishly to Lasa's wife.

Later, Lasa showed Ali's letter to Sridar.

Srinagar

19 September 1999

Dear Lasa,

Aadab! I am sending this letter through a gentleman who is on his way to Delhi. The postal department cannot be trusted these days. They have directions to read the letters coming in and going out of Kashmir. I have contacted a broker who can help find prospective buyers for your house in Srinagar. In the present day you may not get a good sum for the house. In our locality many Muslim families sold their properties and shifted to posh areas.

Nalle-e-Maer has become a very unsafe area. Mujahedeen have taken refuge in the vacant houses. The presence of the security forces, the crackdown on hideouts and the Muslim houses, and frequent crossfire between the mujahedeen and the soldiers make it a very dangerous place to live in. Children and women are the most affected. They are scared and have lost their freedom. Over the last few years many innocent Muslim youths disappeared from their homes. Their parents still wait for their return. The government has given the security forces special powers to kill anybody suspected of being a militant. Many were taken for interrogation to some centers.

We have been betrayed by the government, by the uniformed men, and by the agencies which claim to be our well-wishers.

It is the land they want Lasa, not our hearts.

My mother cannot sleep. The silence of the dark night terrorises her. She listens to the protestors raising slogans of freedom and asks me, 'When will we be free?'

There is not a single Muslim family which has not lost a son. There are tales of loss in every house.

Aftab's son got killed while praying in a mosque. The security forces entered the mosque and opened fire on innocents. They wanted to kill the gunmen who had taken refuge in the mosque. The gunmen opened fire on them, and in the crossfire, innocent people lost their lives. Many people are scared to go to mosques now. A shopping complex was razed to the ground.

In our neighbourhood, a boy died in a gunfight. He had become a militant. His old parents didn't know of his ways and whereabouts. They got to know of their son's death after many days. It was hard for them. His mother didn't know how to react. She thought it was all a prank and her son would come out of hiding and embrace her.

The men from the armed forces visited the old couple every other day and tortured them with all sorts of questions about their dead son. The men would come unannounced, sometimes at odd hours of the day, when the old man and his wife were washing the clothes or offering prayers. The old couple shivered and prayed to God each time they heard the thunderous noise made by the gumboots on their cobbled courtyard. The men in uniform sat for hours in the living room of the couple's house and asked them questions for which they had no answers. Finally, the old couple denied that their son ever lived with them. They denied their love for him. They said that they had banished him from their house because of his wayward behaviour. They called their own son names and cursed him, so that the visitors left them alone.

During the nights, the old man and his wife mourned the death of their son. During the days, they got used to

believing that they had no son. The forgetfulness embalmed the rest of the days, even as they spent the nights in devastating loneliness.

'We apologise to you. We beg for eternal forgiveness,' the boy's father said to the men who never got tired of coming to his house every day to get answers to their questions.

'We are not fanatics. My son was not a militant. He just loved to sleep and ride his bicycle. We shall nurse his wounds in paradise,' the old couple prayed to God in the silence of the night. They also prayed that no one heard their plea to God.

The visits continued for months together and the old couple resigned to their fate. They tried to befriend the visitors and offered them tea. Slowly they forgot that the visitors were enemies. Praying for help did not give them any hope. Helplessness became a habit. They could not sleep ever after.

Does Rattanlal remember me? I wrote him a letter, but so far he has not replied. Does he think of me as 'good-riddance?' I remember how Rattanlal used to say, 'Muslims will suffer when Pandits leave Kashmir.'

Lasa, the Kashmir which belonged to us has changed. The Kashmir which once was ours is burning. Every day military crackdowns visit us. Mothers wake up to sudden disappearance of their sons. Those who took to violence, revolt and resistance die. Our Kashmir is no longer the paradise on earth. The smile on the face of a poor Kashmiri is false.

The Hindu Governor betrayed all of us. He separated the Pandits from their Muslim brothers. He sowed seeds of hatred. How can Pandits live elsewhere when their roots are here? Their homes and hearts are here. They don't have to burn to their

homes and to their Muslim brothers and sisters someday. Kashmir without the Pandits is no Kashmir. By losing you Kashmir lost its soul.

Lasa, can we ever get back what we lost? Will our children get their childhood back? That what is lost, is irretrievable. I yearn for the day when we can meet and open our wounds to each other. Do give my love to your son and convey my regards to your family.

God bless!

Ali

After two months Lasa sold his house to a Muslim family who wanted to shift from a village in Kashmir to the city. They paid six hundred thousand rupees for the house. But Lasa was happy. He deposited the money in a bank, hoping to buy a plot of land with it someday.

After a few months, Lasa wrote a letter to Ali.

Baderkote

2 December 1999

Dear Ali,

My old house is no longer mine. In exile I have seen myself die many times. I have fallen in love with the wretched smile on the face of the woman whose face has lost the ability to smile. I have learnt to love the four walls of the rented room I live in.

During the early years in exile, the Pandits huddled in tents and cattle sheds. There was nowhere to go, nowhere to hide our fear. The community struggled to come to terms with an unfamiliar land. The migrants faced harsh conditions.

The tents and the sheds were so small and dark that people wandered aimlessly on the roads, as though in search of something. The old perished into a dark void and nothingness! And some found themselves imprisoned in the shackles of dwindling hope and longing.

The old and the infirm died, but before they died, they all turned mad, one by one. Madness invaded and crushed them all. There was no mourning in the rented houses. Mourning was forbidden. A generation turned into stone. A generation forgot itself!

Pandits are settling in the new land. We feel that whatever took place happened for the good. Pandits attained freedom on the day they left Kashmir. However, in this process, both communities lost a generation. Muslims lost many children and Pandits lost their elders.

Who among us will return to Kashmir now? We yearn for our homeland but will not return. Longing and nostalgia will keep us sane and rooted. And if ever we return, we will stay in houseboats and hotels and take pictures of our long lost homes. We will tell our children stories of who we were. We will show them the beautiful mountains, the fountains and the gardens. We will show them the cherry trees, under which we sat and plucked cherries. We will show them the rivers in which our reflections still float. We will show them the corners in which the shadows of our childhood still lurk. We will take them to the temples where shrieks still echo in the decrepit walls. We will take them to the dirty streets where the marbles from our childhood still lie buried under junk. I long for good days. Yet, when I look at my friends here, I grow sad to see how they have lost themselves to a growing madness.

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Ali, I am sure one day we will meet and start our conversation from where we left it. I remember our conversation while walking on the boulevard circling the Dal Lake! You had asked an unspoken question. I gave an unspoken answer. And we parted. This parting is not forever. We will meet. We will re-live the lost time.

Till then, we must continue to hate and love.

Regards,

Lasa



A year later when Sridar decided to leave for Delhi once again to take up a full-time job as a writer with a company that owned travel websites, his father handed over things to him that he had preserved in a wooden chest. Things that belonged to Mahanandju! There were pages from an old letter written to Mahanandju by his father. The letter was written somewhere from Turkey. Sridar read the letter. It talked about his great-grandfather's exploits in Europe and quest for knowledge during his voyages in different countries in Europe. He had written about many books on various subjects.

The letter also mentioned a book which Mahanandju's father had written. Some pages of the letter were lost. From the pages which had been preserved, Sridar gathered that his great-grandfather had written a book, which was published in Italy. The title of the book was not mentioned in the letter. The book was about a clan of snake worshippers which disappeared during a social revolt against some rituals and traditions.

For the first time Lasa revealed snippets about his grandfather's life to Sridar. He remembered his father's account of his grandfather.

'My grandfather ran away from home some years after his marriage and returned after almost a decade. He returned a learned man, who had changed his name and appearance. He returned a widely read and widely travelled man and brought along many books on theology and philosophy. He told Mahanandju that he had read all the religious texts during his travels across Europe and discovered his own identity. He had met many eminent men and women in Europe. He talked about a place in Germany where he became a recluse for three years and went into hiding. When he returned to Kashmir, he could speak Turkish, Portuguese, Latin and Greek. Although he did not bring copies of his book, he mentioned that the book was published in Italy. He used to receive many letters from his friends in Europe, some of whom were famous there. They would send him invitations for religious conferences in Europe. And he would write them letters,' narrated Lasa.

'Can the book be located?' Sridar asked.

'Not in India. Maybe, some copies still exist in some libraries in Europe. It must not have been reprinted at all. A few copies of the book which arrived in Kashmir were burnt by the Maharaja. I wish we had preserved a copy of the book with us,' Lasa lamented.

'What was the book about? Do you know anyone who has read the book?'

'I wish I could find out. Your great-grandfather was a great man Sridar. He was an enlightened soul. He did not let himself be imprisoned by narrow-mindedness. He was a seeker who wanted to know the world. He had fire in his soul and heart. He left the comforts of his house and wandered in many parts of Asia and Europe in search of knowledge. Yet, he was brave enough to return to his wife and family,' Lasa said.

Sridar kept the pages of the letter in his bag. In his heart he thought about his great-grandfather and made a secret promise to himself; a promise to carry forward the journey.

In the summer of 2001 Sridar joined his new office in Delhi. He worked as a writer for a travel and tourism website. He took time in getting accustomed to the new job. Travel writing came easily to him. In no time his work began to be noticed by his colleagues.

A year later in the spring of 2002, when Sridar was to depart for Denver to take an assignment with the American headquarters of his company, his father came over to stay with him for a few days in his apartment at Delhi. Lasa had started taking some lessons in violin from a local musician who also sold musical instruments. He wanted to buy a new violin in Delhi. Sridar took him to Old Delhi to explore shops that sold musical instruments. They found one that claimed to have violins from Czechoslovakia, Poland and England.

'This one is good,' Lasa said as he ran the bow over the strings.

'Melodious, you have learnt a lot. It feels like the night,' commended Sridar.

'I want to create melancholy and nostalgia. Each note should touch the heart.'

'The one from Prague has the best body. The finish of the wood is so perfect. My teacher will like it.'

'Six hundred and fifty for this one! Nine hundred for the one next to it!' the shopkeeper said. 'Just adjust the bridge a bit and try to play it once more.'

'Now those are the right notes of the *raga*. Thank you for liking it.'

CC-O. Agamnigam Digital Preservation Foundation, Chandigarh.
'I will get you one from America,' Sridar promised.

In the evenings Lasa played some notes on his new violin. He played the same notes over and over again, to improvise and attain perfection. His teacher had once told him that simple notes were the most difficult to play.

'Music drowns depression. And when it does so, it can unite you with the Divine,' he said.

Lenin no longer worked in Delhi. Someone told Sridar that he had shifted to Calcutta to work on his films. But finding Lenin was not an easy job. He had snapped all contacts with the outside world. Sridar came to know that Lenin had married a tribal girl from West Bengal; a girl who had lost her home and did not possess any remembrance of home. Four years later, Lenin's first film on the tribals of West Bengal was to catapult him into cinematic fame. His film dealt with migration of tribal people from across lands. For them their home was the land near the river where they were born. A construction of a dam forced their lives to change course, like the river, and migrate to other parts of the state. The film portrayed an old tribal woman, who continued to smile even after being displaced from her home. She still hoped to return to her hut.

Sridar had last met Rahul and Anil in the winter of 1989 in Kashmir. They lost touch with one another during migration.

Rahul met Sridar in Delhi after locating his address from a newspaper office in which Sridar's articles appeared. His debut movie was released the same month. They met at a restaurant in New Delhi. Rahul remembered everything about their school days in Srinagar. Sridar was the only boy who believed in Rahul's dreams.

'I knew that one day we would be sitting like this and you would be a famous movie star. It is a proud moment,' Sridar said to Rahul.

They talked about Anil and wondered about his whereabouts. The only way of locating him was to get in touch with their other classmates. A month later Rahul called Sridar from Bombay and informed him of the death of their friend Anil.

‘My God! When did this happen?’

‘Six years ago. Or maybe, seven! He died in a hospital battling a virus,’ Rahul stuttered. ‘I found out the details of his condition from an old classmate of ours. Anil was sick for many months after leaving Kashmir. The doctors kept him alive for many months. But towards the end, medicines and treatment did not work at all. He could not even swallow a swig of water.’

‘We shall never meet him again. We did not even say farewell to him in Kashmir,’ Sridar said.



FOUR



It was a cold evening when Sridar landed at New York's John F. Kennedy Airport. Next day he was to take a connecting flight to Denver from the La Guardia International Airport. A hotel room in Queens had been booked for him. He hailed a cab.

'Are you from Lahore?' the cab driver asked Sridar as he sat in the cab.

'No, from India! I belong to Delhi,' Sridar said.

'I am from Pakistan. Migrated to New York eight years ago! Have been driving a cab ever since! My brother works in a restaurant here. Where are you headed to in America?'

'Am taking a flight to Denver tomorrow! I am on a year's deputation to America,' Sridar said looking from the windowpane and wiping the moisture from the pane to see the skyscrapers of New York.

'I am sure you will like it here.'

'How do you like living in America? Don't you miss your home in Pakistan?' he asked the cab driver.

'It was hard for the first few months. I could not bear the loneliness here. I missed my home, the neighbourhood and my friends and relatives. But slowly this place became my home. I sent money to my wife. She paid off our debts and then joined me here. We are used to living here now. In old age we shall return to our village in Pakistan to be buried by the side of my grandfather's grave.'

The cab driver laughed. He was proud of his achievements.

'How is it like living in Delhi? My uncles visited Delhi many years back. Were you born there?' he asked Sridar.

'I was born in Kashmir.'

'Kashmir! Such a beautiful place on earth! You will like Denver. It is much like Kashmir.'

Sridar marvelled at the neon lights that set the landscape ablaze.

'Here is my number. Call me tomorrow and I will take you to La Guardia from your hotel,' the cab driver said handing over his card to Sridar as he got down from the cab.

The night passed quickly. The morning was cold. Sridar called home to inform of his arrival in America.

His grandmother said sorrowfully on the phone, 'Take care of yourself and keep me informed of your health. I will miss you on your birthday.'

The next day Sridar boarded a plane to Denver.

The snow-capped mountains looked beautiful. Snow always made Sridar happy. Soon he closed his eyes and fell asleep peacefully. He was happy to see the mountains and the snow reappear when he woke up. The cab driver was right. Denver seemed so much like Kashmir. The drive from the airport to downtown Denver reminded him of the avenues in Kashmir.

The poplars, the willows and the maples on both sides of the road haunted him and brought back frayed memories of the drive from his old home to a village in Kashmir. For a moment he thought that he had regained his home.

'Nothing is lost after all. Is this home or just a false reflection?' he surmised.

His colleague in Denver had already readied a studio apartment for him.

His new address read: 34, Pine Crest, South Quince Street. Denver, CO.

His apartment was small but beautiful. A reproduction of Dali's *Persistence of Memory* hung on the wall. A chair, a writing desk and a bed among other things! There was nothing more to wish for.

'Perfect! Now I shall begin a new chapter,' he said to himself.

Every morning he began his day by reading the headlines in the *Denver Post*. And every weekend he gobbled *The New York Times*. He enjoyed the morning bus ride to his office in downtown Denver. He loved to look at the trees and the distant mountains. He remembered his childhood and lost friends. And he thought that Denver would make a perfect place to write. Slowly, he settled in his new home. He resumed his writing. He apologised to himself for waiting so long to turn his dreams into stories.

The apartment complex in which he lived was full of people from different nationalities. He made acquaintance with his fellow countrymen, who worked in different companies. They often met at the Indian grocery. Sridhar went to the grocery every Friday to borrow tapes of newly released Bollywood movies. The Indians did not talk about their States in India or their

work. The conversations were mostly about weekend sales in different departmental stores in downtown, the plans for the long weekends and the new Bollywood movies.

He met immigrants working in America. They were from Pakistan, Bangladesh, India, Japan, China, Africa, Israel and other countries. They spoke their languages. They saw thousands of dreams; dreams of happiness and of success and wealth. They created small homes for themselves away from their homes. They had settled in new lands and nourished longings to return to their roots in old age, to tend their gardens and live peacefully with their memories of life in exile.

Lasa wrote letters to Sridar. In one of the letters he mentioned a gentleman, a Kashmiri Pandit doctor in Denver, Dr Rupesh Zadoo. He was a columnist who wrote for the papers there. He was also a member of Panun Kashmir in the USA.

'See, if you can locate Dr Zadoo. I have read his articles. You will enjoy his company,' his father wrote in a letter.

His father gave him Dr Zadoo's email address.

Sridar heard from Dr Zadoo soon after he sent him an email. They fixed up a date to meet up at Dr Zadoo's apartment in South Denver. When they finally met at his residence, the doctor seemed a bit reticent, but soon got talking when he got to know of Sridar's background. Dr Zadoo worked as a doctor in a hospital in Denver. When Panun Kashmir was founded, he took up the role of representing the movement in the USA. He was also the convenor of an association of Kashmiri Pandits settled overseas and was passionate about organising meetings and celebrating Pandit festivals. They observed all rituals with gaiety, and Dr Zadoo wrote about these in his columns in the community newsletter.

'The community is happy and content here, but Kashmir is in our hearts,' Dr Zadoo said to him. 'Why don't you also write for our community newsletter?' he urged Sridar, serving him a cup of *kehva* and a *bagel*.

'I would certainly do so,' Sridar said.

'You can write about exile, migration, the killings, the condition of migrants in the camps at Jammu, the community on the verge of extinction, the loss of identity and homeland. There is so much to write. Make the world aware of our helplessness and plight.'

'Death to the militants!' Dr Zadoo's mother said wiping tears from her eyes. 'Even our Muslim neighbours, whom we trusted for years, silently watched us get killed and then depart from our homes. They wanted us to leave so that they could seize our property and all our possessions in Kashmir.'

'She lost her brother,' Dr Zadoo said to Sridar. 'He was killed by the militants when he refused to leave his house. Since then she has nothing in her heart but anger and hate.'

'I can feel her pain and anguish. Her anger is justified. No killing can ever do any good,' Sridar said.

Dr Zadoo narrated how he campaigned for the Kashmiri Pandit cause at various fora in the United States.

'We have no representation at all in the world. There is no one among us whose voice matters and who is influential enough to make the governments take note of the Pandits' condition and predicament. We demand Panun Kashmir where we can settle down peacefully. Our children need to know their past. We need to preserve our age-old culture. We must keep our tradition and our sanskars alive. We must demand our separate homeland in Kashmir. The world does not see anything except Kashmiri Muslims and their demand for freedom. The world

thinks that their plight is worse than ours. They want freedom from India. We want our homes back. Kashmiri Muslims, the militants and their demand for freedom from India are only half-truth. The other half is us, struggling to survive, rootless and homeless in the hot sun, begging the world to see our wounds and to hear our shrieks.

'You must not be silent Sridar. You must not let the memory fade. Don't think of Kashmir as a beautiful valley. Think of it as a drop of your ancestral blood; remember that our community went through genocide; remember that we were uprooted from our homes and made to wilt in an unfamiliar land in our own country. You must try to rediscover and regain what you lost,' Dr Zadoo said.

Dr Zadoo seemed miserable in having to come to terms with the loss of his ancestral house in Kashmir. His look betrayed desperation and anger when his mother refused to go out of their apartment in Denver.

'This place is not Kashmir. My home is lost,' she said to her son when he took her out for a ride.

'I couldn't return to our village in Kashmir to immerse my father's ashes into the river there. It was his last wish,' Dr Zadoo said.

That evening Sridar had dinner with the family. They had cooked haakh which they grew in their kitchen garden.

'A mini Kashmir! Isn't it? I try to recreate Kashmir for my mother here in Denver,' he said.

Before Sridar left, the doctor gave him some journals and pamphlets to read.

Sridar started writing stories for the Kashmiri Pandit community newsletter in Denver. But somehow, writing stories

did not satisfy him. Confused and restless, he continued to search for the answers.



One day while sitting in Denver Public Library, Sridar was suddenly reminded of a dream he had dreamt some days back. He had dreamt of his great-grandfather's lost book. In his dream he had felt the touch of the pages of the book. The letters on the cover of the book were prominent. Some titles flashed and then disappeared.

Later when he recollected the images from his dream, he tried to remember the title of the book. Some titles appeared in flashes: *The Book of Lost Time . . . The Book of Lost Clan . . . The Book of Ancestors . . .*

Slowly, it became clear to Sridar that he had a purpose to fulfil. His search led him to a stage where he could clearly see the hollowness of his soul. He dreaded the hollowness. He stood petrified at the growing agony of a lost generation. He dreamt of the lost Kashmiri Pandit clan, which had revolted against a similar degeneration of the soul. He saw the people of the clan rebel. And he saw them vanish into nowhere.

He wondered what his great-grandfather's book was about.

'I will not reconcile to my fate. I will not give up the search. I will till the soil once again, sow the seeds, water the saplings, and tend my garden once again,' he mused.

He dreamt of going back to Kashmir. He knew it was not easy. And he feared that he might not be able to go back to Kashmir in his lifetime. A year, two years, five years! Seven migrations, the last migration of the Kashmiri Pandits! Deaths,

torture, hollowness, and finally the settlement! His thoughts dangled between the meaningful past and the futile present.

'Soon, we all will forget. Forgetfulness will invade everyone. Collective amnesia will lead to permanent vacuity of the mind,' he wrote in his notebook.

He remembered Pamposh's words to him many years back in the camp, 'We have no pictures of our ancestors.'

He remembered what Pamposh had said about the hollow sun, the snakebite, the insect-ridden night of Pamposh's grandmother in the camp, the forbidden desire in his deranged grandfather's heart – the desire to smell his granddaughter's urine.

This was not what he wanted to remember forever. He felt sorry for waiting so long for this realisation. One by one, they all came in his dreams. Tota Maecz, Juma Saecz, the amnesia-ridden old age of his grandfather, the lost book, the almond grove of his childhood, the walk on the Bund, the tents, boxes brought along and kept close to the chest of the dead Pandit woman, his only love, and the Lama who spoke of happiness. Sridar could not sleep for nights. The torn dreams cluttered his mind. The nights and days were empty, bereft of any peace.

For nine months Sridar came and went through the same lanes every day. He performed the routine tasks in his office. He felt the pain. He wanted to return home, to the land where he could meet his homeless people and trace their journeys from where their memory began. He wanted to write about the people living in exile, their fathers and mothers, ancestors.

It was very hard for Sridar to keep the interest alive in his job. The more he felt tormented inside, the more passionate he felt about leaving his job, the money and the security. He wanted to return to his people, the exiled community. The fire

within consumed his soul every day. He could not read any more. He stopped visiting the library. He spent the weekends watching movies and waiting for the day he would return to his home in India.

One evening he received a phone call from Ramesh. Ramesh studied at a college in New York and also took afternoon classes for researchers. They spoke of the old days in Delhi; the vagabond days. Ramesh promised to drop in for a weekend stay with Sridar at Denver.

'There is a lot to talk about. We shall have rum and talk about life and its purpose,' Ramesh said.

'Yes, and I still remember how we used to relish the boiled eggs and the hot *puris* at the university cafeteria in Delhi and wonder if we would ever be able to do anything worthwhile. We used to laugh and smoke and read poetry to keep us sane in this insane world,' Sridar recalled.

'My God! You remember everything!'

'How can I forget those days? Once we spent the entire night running from one tree to the other to flee from the mosquitoes in the university campus. We ran out of cigarettes and sought refuge in a discussion on the universal and the particular. I did not know what I talked about. Finally, I gave up and fell silent. You survived through the night, reciting passages from a play. It was magical.'

'The vagabond days! The days of wild innocence!'

Ramesh could not make it to Denver, as he had promised, during the fall. Nevertheless, Sridar kept in touch with him through occasional phone calls and emails.

After spending a little more than eighteen months in Denver, he returned to India in 2002.

The migrant camp in the stadium at Jammu had changed. Twelve years had passed. Sridar felt a change in himself too. He recalled the day when he had first entered the camp. He had obtained a copy of the list of some migrant families living in the camps from the Relief Commissioner's office in Jammu.

Sridar ran his fingers through the pages hoping to read a familiar name. There were no familiar names.

One migrant family was from a very remote village in Kashmir; a village in the North of Kashmir, where there were only eleven Pandit families before migration. These families used to earn their livelihood by farming.

Sridar had heard of the government's plan to rehabilitate those migrants who lived in camps. Nearby construction was underway to build two-room flats for them. Many migrants had evacuated the tents as soon as they could afford to rent rooms. Many families whose children had taken up jobs bought small plots of land in Jammu to construct houses. Only the old and the middle-aged lived in Jammu. The young had moved to different states and settled there. During the early period in exile, the trains departing from the Jammu railway station carried hundreds of migrant boys and girls to other states for education. The sacrifice of their parents had borne fruit years later, when the children got jobs and supported their parents.

After years in exile, the migrants built a temple devoted to the Goddess Zala in Jammu. The hillock resembled the hill in Kashmir on which the original temple existed. These were the signs of the migrants carving their destiny.

Sridar wanted to meet old men and women.

In one family there was an old migrant in his nineties who had survived the onslaught of torturous years in exile. Sridar went in search of this man who was originally from a village.

According to some migrants living in the camp, the old man and his family had shifted into a one-room tenement.

Sridar had spent months preparing notes and a structure for the work he was about to undertake. He had drawn up a list of people he would meet. He was interested in listening to their stories; who they were, where they came from, and who their ancestors were.

The Book of Ancestors! That was the book which Sridar wanted to write. For Pamposh whose past he did not know, for a lost community, and for Michael Bawm, his great-grandfather.

Sridar frequented the camp to talk to the migrants and listen to their tales. The tattered tents had vanished. He saw an old woman sit silently in a chair. She did not move for long and looked like a statue. Sridar imagined his own grandmother sitting in the chair and waiting for the day to end, so that someone could take her inside. 'The woman must have spent all the days of the last several years like this. Waiting!' he thought. He wanted to talk to the woman, hold her by her hand, and lead her to some shade. He wondered if the woman had any grandchildren.

Some forgotten recollections came to Sridar's mind; that of his mother sending him to the baker near their house in Kashmir to buy lavasas, while she cooked mutton on the oven. 'Walk on the pavement, not in the middle of the road Sridar,' she would say. 'And don't pick up any discarded things from the roadside.' Grandfather arranging shoes symmetrically in the corridor; grandmother struggling to pass an obstinate thread through the eye of a needle!

Twelve years ago, the Camp Commandant's office was abuzz with hectic activity – the distribution of ration tickets and

registration numbers, the scrounging around the camp for rice and sugar. Now, some boys played cricket in the ground.

'Where are the people who once lived here?' Sridar wondered, thinking about Pamposh.

'Am I already late?' he asked himself thinking that the people he desired to meet had either perished or disappeared. He wanted to see if the scars of migration had healed, and to assess if remembrance still existed. In the nights, he rummaged through heaps of newspaper articles. The room where he camped was full of books, photographs, articles and reports. The Kashmiri Pandit story did not exist anywhere. The migrants and their stories did not appear in most news items related to Kashmir. There were no statistics, no pictures of the dead and of the dilapidated Pandit houses, no accounts of brutalities on Pandits in Kashmir, no record of disease in the migrant camps. There were no stories of people's past. There were no memories of ancestors. There was no remembrance of a generation which had lived in Kashmir.

Sridar aspired to capture the recollections of the people who still remembered their stories and ancestors.

Sridar had heard the story of his great-grandmother several times. The story remained etched in his memory and always haunted him. His great-grandmother had died with a fishbone stuck in her throat the day they celebrated Gada Bhata. It was a dark night and the family had cooked rice and fish for the Lord of the House. Moments before her death, she had spoken a riddle to the children in the family. Everyone waited for the answer to the riddle, while she laughed and froze to death with a fishbone in her throat. No one asked riddles ever after. No one narrated anecdotes.

Sridar began his book with an account of his great-grandmother's tales and exploits.

The migrant family he met lived in a dingy camp near the stadium. He shouldered his way into their room through a maze of other rooms in the camp. People played cards all day long.

A migrant said to him, 'We have been playing cards for years now.'

Triloki Nath's father Bab had turned ninety-two the year they shifted into a one-room tenement. For years they had lived in a tent. The family was originally from Magam, a village in Kashmir. Bab sat still in a corner, waiting for the 4 o'clock tea. He refused to part with his old pheran and a *pozs*. He had lost all his teeth and the wrinkles on his face formed a web. He smiled when Sridar greeted him.

'Namaskar Mahra!'

'The boy is saying Namaskar! Will you not greet him and bless him?' Triloki Nath shouted in his father's ears.

'He is deaf now,' Bab's wife said.

In the room there was a bucket full of unwashed clothes. The old woman lit a joss stick to swallow the atrocious smell. Outside the room, Triloki Nath's son sat on a cemented slab and sprinkled water on the vegetables he had put for sale. Turnips, radishes, potatoes, and onions wilted slowly in the scorching heat of the day. Their neighbours operated a phone booth and sold household items.

'We traded in walnuts. We had plenty of walnut trees in Kashmir. After migration, my husband's brothers refused to take care of Bab and my mother-in-law and left them with us,' Triloki Nath's wife said. She did not seem to be happy, but pretended to be brave in the helpless situation.

'We had everything in our home. Bab's father was a prosperous man. He owned acres and acres of land in the village. He even built a temple on the hilltop,' she added.

'Bab, why don't you narrate something about your childhood and youth in Kashmir? This young man has come to meet us and is writing a story about migrants,' Triloki Nath shouted in his father's ear.

The old man turned his head and smiled at Sridar. His lips were cracked and his eyes grey.

'What will I say? We had everything there. Chuni Lal snatched everything from us. The land and the house!' the old man lisped.

'Chuni Lal is my uncle,' Triloki Nath said. 'Bab thinks that he stole everything.'

'Where did you live in Kashmir?' Sridar asked the old man.

'I have forgotten the address. It is written in the ration card. Our house must still be there among the walnut trees,' he replied.

The ration card mentioned the permanent address as 'Village Magam, Kashmir.' The temporary address read: Camp number 44, Migrant Camp, Stadium, Jammu.

Bab had studied in a village school till the fourth grade and then married Haer when she was fifteen years old. Haer was many years younger to him. Triloki Nath was the third and the youngest son. He had studied till eighth grade and worked in his father's walnut orchard in Kashmir. He had two children, a son and a daughter. He had married his daughter in the eleventh year of exile. His son was a graduate, who failed to clear any competitive examination in the state. After two years of joblessness, he worked as a part-time cook.

Sridar asked Triloki Nath if they had preserved any heirlooms that had been passed from one generation to another in their family, from his forefathers to him. Triloki Nath tried hard to remember and looked at the empty shelves in the room. His gaze was vacant and his memory hazy. He asked Bab if he remembered any such item that belonged to his father and grandfather.

'Bab, Sridar is asking the name of your father and grandfather and wants to know what they did for a living, and if you have any memory of the days you spent with them?'

Bab raised his eyes and looked amazed at the question.

'Why is this young man interested in old and forgotten tales? So many years have gone by and no one has cared so far. We are just names without addresses,' Bab said. His eyes shone and a smile appeared on his lips.

'I want to listen to the story Bab. That is why I am here,' Sridar said.

'I was born in a house which had a dozen rooms,' Bab recounted. 'My father told me that some of the rooms in our house were haunted. He said so to keep me and other kids from going into the rooms. I grew up amid apple and walnut orchards. My father Madhavjoo and grandfather Gulabram grew apples and walnuts in our orchards. There was an old temple in our village. Pandits from all over the Valley would come to the temple in summers to make offerings to the goddess. Nearby there was a fish pond, where the pilgrims waited to catch a glimpse of the fish. Only the most pious of the souls had been lucky enough to view the goddess. As a child, I often saw her appear from behind the black rocks in the pond. And I tried to catch her with my tiny hands. She eluded me as I grew into a young man.'

'My mother Durgawati came from Nagbal. Her father Ramdev was a Sanskrit scholar, who studied the scriptures under the tutelage of Shridhar Joo. He worked as a priest in the temple at Ishbar.

'I did not have many friends in my youth. However, I was close to Jawahar Bhan, who went to the same school as I till the fourth grade. When he grew up, he started a radio shop in our village. He even went to the city to undergo some training in repairing radios and transistors. He died some years back in the camp. His son was killed by militants, a few days before the migration of Pandits from our village.

'My father gave me a shaving razor when I started shaving. I don't know where I lost it. I remember every detail from my childhood days. An old picture of my father and mother is still in my box. My greatest possession was my house; the house with a dozen rooms and the walnut trees in the courtyard!'

'Bab, did you have any Muslim friends in Kashmir?' Sridar asked hesitatingly.

'All of them in our neighbourhood were dear to me. We were all together most of the time,' Bab said and looked at his wife. 'Isn't it?' he asked her.

'I wonder how they are there. They must have forgotten us,' Haer said as she looked fondly at her husband. 'I remember Aziz and Jamal and Hasan. Their children played in our courtyard every day. They were like our family. Women cried bitterly and beat their chests when they heard we were leaving our homes. Aziz's wife stood on the street and pleaded to God to stop the Pandit families from migrating from the village. She even thrashed her son with wild nettles for keeping silent and bringing a gun home.'

'Today she is singing their praises. Some years ago, she was cursing the militants,' Triloki Nath whispered tremulously in Sridar's ears. 'Sometimes she loves them and sometimes she hates them. But she does miss Aziz's wife. They used to gossip all day.'

'Bab, do you remember one Michael Bawm from Yarbala in Srinagar?' Sridar asked in anticipation. 'He was my great-grandfather. He wrote a book on a lost clan which disappeared during an agitation. Do you have any recollection of that lost clan; a group of families, who revolted against the customs practised by the Pandits?'

Bab narrowed his eyes. He touched his forehead to feel the wrinkles.

'I heard about a clan in Kashmir when I was on a visit to a temple in Srinagar many decades back. How they disappeared remains a mystery. Some say that they were thrown into the Vitasta,' Bab said, speaking slowly.

'I am in search of my great-grandfather's book,' Sridar said.

'We will find all our ancestral possessions when we return to our homes. Don't worry. After all, we have to be cremated in the land of our ancestors. Where else do we go from here?' Bab said with a smile.

Bab still had hope of returning to his house in Kashmir. His wife and son were happy that at times, his past made him forget the present.

Triloki Nath smiled at his father's words.

Before leaving, Sridar shook Bab's hands and gave him a warm embrace.

'I will come and meet you again soon,' Sridar said.

That night Sridar wrote about what Bab had narrated. He drew up the entire family tree up to the time Bab remembered. Sridar wondered how many such old men and women still existed in the migrant camps and elsewhere.

Sridar telephoned his father: 'These people will die soon, one by one, and take with them their memories. The precious stories will be lost forever. Years later, no one would be able to know their identity. No one would remember where they came from. The old are losing their memory. The young are busy in mundane affairs and do not care about the stories of their elders.'

Sridar could not bear the torment in his soul. He struggled with the list containing the names and addresses of the migrant families. Only the old figured in the list. He went in search of them to listen to what they remembered of their forefathers and see the ancestral totems they had preserved.

There were only a handful of old migrants in the camp. Others were dead and many suffered from dementia. Memory betrayed them. Sridar wrote from what he remembered of Mahanandju's stories.

He kept awake through the nights and wrote his book. It was a string of many stories. Some stories didn't have any beginnings. Others did not have any endings.

Sridar chose to stay with an acquaintance, who lived alone in a rented accommodation near the migrant camp at Jammu. The man worked as an agent with an insurance company. He lent Sridar a room to stay in and write his book. He was connected with all the migrant families in the camp. He knew them all by their names and the villages they came from. During the early days of the Pandit migration, he worked as a volunteer in the Migrant Registration department.

For years there were silent deaths and cremations. People came and vanished without being noticed. Friends lost their friends, and neighbours lost their neighbours. In the new land the migrants made new friends and acquaintances, but remembered only their names and faces. Each year in exile brought in merciless delusions and forgetfulness. For Sridar tracing people meant tracing the dead.

Some days later Sridar met another migrant family. Someone told Sridar that this family was very poor before migration. Except an old house in shambles, they had owned nothing else. They all lived on one meal a day. Every evening the daughter-in-law of the house washed the utensils noisily in the basin, so that their neighbours believed that they had eaten. She ensured that the sound made by the utensils reached the neighbours' living rooms. When she felt that the neighbours grew suspicious of her pretence, she yelled to one of her neighbours from the courtyard, 'The turnip curry was delicious today. Not a drop is left, otherwise I would have sent some for you.'

The incessant clamouring of the utensils every evening lasted long. No one knew how they slept hungry for days together.

The family invented stories to hide their poverty from their neighbours. The great-grandfather had worked in the army of the Maharaja of Kashmir. His fourth wife Amrawati had died a few years after giving birth to their only son, who grew up to work as a clerk with the Kashmir Police. His name was Dina Nath. His wife had died years back in Srinagar.

Dina Nath's son did not even have enough money to pay for his father's cataract operation in a hospital. Dina Nath earned a pension every month. The family also got the monthly monetary relief from the government. His son managed the money his

father received and saved it for his youngest daughter's wedding. Dina Nath lost interest in money after losing his memory in exile. Once when he did not return home till late evening, the neighbours found him sitting on the roadside and waiting. When they asked him who he was waiting for, he said that he was waiting for Sheikh Abdullah. That is when they realised that he had started losing his memory. From that day onwards, sometimes he remembered things perfectly, and sometimes he forgot everything.

'Dina Nath is a tortured soul. May God relieve him of his burdens soon!' the man from the camp said to Sridar.

Sridar asked Dina Nath's daughter-in-law to share any snippets from her childhood and youth. She narrated stories about the weddings in the family; how grand the weddings used to be, how they used to sing songs and relish the feasts, and how the elders distributed food to the poor.

'Before marriage, I lived like a queen. There were servants to look after the household, cleaning and washing,' she boasted, revelling in her own recollection of her life in Kashmir. She was content in the stories she weaved of her riches and tried to hide her poverty and condition behind a veil of dreams.

Dina Nath sat quietly in a corner of the room. His granddaughter served him lunch.

'Won't you ask Sridar to have lunch with us?' his granddaughter asked him.

The old man smiled and asked Sridar to wash his hands.

'Yes, he will have meal with us. He wants to talk to you and ask you about your mother. You remember everything. Don't you?' the girl asked her grandfather.

The girl loved her grandfather. She hated to see him grow old and weak. She was the one who helped him eat, sit and

recline on an old mattress. Sridar looked into the old man's eyes and felt sad. His eyes were grey and didn't move at all.

'Here are some coins for you. Buy some nice things,' he said to her.

The family had stopped his medication when they realised that he was losing his memory and mental balance. Initially, they thought it was old age and senility. They secretly prayed for his death.

Dina Nath talked a lot about his mother. He wept when Sridar asked him about his mother and father. He said that he still had a cap which his father wore, when he served as a soldier in the Maharaja's army.

Later, his son told Sridar that his grandfather was delusional and saw things which did not exist. Sridar saw emptiness in the old man's eyes. And longing too! Longing to leave this world behind!

Sridar felt as though they did not care for the old man and the things he possessed. Things that his father and grandfather once possessed and handed over to him! Things that mattered to him, but not to his son and grandchildren! They had no use for these things. Sridar suspected that they must have bartered them for some utensils.

'Dina Nath' was just a name on the ration card. And the name fetched the family a monetary relief every month and rice and sugar. He had waited all these years to talk about his childhood, but what he remembered were disjointed fragments of his childhood.

The last words Dina Nath had said echoed in Sridar's mind, over and over again. 'I want to die in my house in Kashmir and be cremated there.'

The slowness of time was what Sridar yearned for. Each day was precious. Each day brought in a new hollowness within him. His writing progressed at good pace as he met the migrants who narrated sketchy details of their past. And, one by one, they all lined up in a park holding empty vessels and ration cards in their hands.

Sridar witnessed migrants settling in new houses. They had hung portraits of gods and goddesses on the walls. But there were no portraits of their ancestors and old homes. The migrants identified themselves with the new land and a new milieu which they discovered. They continued to observe old rituals in their new homes.

The community got divided into two sections: migrants who had their own houses and migrants still living in camps.

Sridar divided his time between Jammu and Baderkote. He wanted to visit Kashmir and see his old house and meet all the people who knew his grandfather and great-grandfather. He thought of Juma Saecz, the old man Gota who made pinwheels, and Qadir Goor, the milkman at Yarbale. There were others who lived near Yarbale. He wondered if Habib was alive.

For more than a year, Sridar did not go back to Delhi. He spent the entire year at Jammu and Baderkote, trying to collect all the stories of those who remembered their childhood in Kashmir. He forgot about everything else and concentrated on writing his book, which he thought would take two years to complete.

Lasa wanted to shift to Jammu once again. He wanted to buy a plot of land and construct a small house someday. He sold some of his wife's gold ornaments to arrange for the additional money he needed to buy a plot of land. Many of their relatives had already constructed houses for themselves.

Lasa's friends had settled in Jammu and some had moved to Delhi to be with their children.

Baderkote became a sleepy town once again, with many migrants evacuating it for other towns and cities. The stairs to the college were deserted. No one walked on the Link Road. The children born in exile were unaware of their roots and ties with the land of their forefathers. They spoke a new language.

Sridar kept indoors mostly. He read the newspapers in the mornings and spent the afternoons sleeping. In the silence of the nights, he wrote his book. During the daytime, the narrow streets were empty. Except the hawkers, no one sauntered the streets. The mendicants had disappeared.

Lasa continued practising the violin. His interest grew more as he learnt new renditions.

Some pages of Sridar's book were blank. He imagined the lost clan of Pandits, which had disappeared or been killed by unknown assailants during a social revolt. He felt sad at his inability to find his great-grandfather's book anywhere. He did not abandon hope, and somewhere in his heart, he believed that someday he would come across a copy of the book. He wrote to the different libraries and archives of the world to enquire about the book.

Month after month, Sridar met more migrant families in the camp. It was a community of the old, abandoned by their children; of men and women who spent their life waiting for the final days when their children would come from other cities to perform the last rites.

Sridar wrote their personal histories; stories of their childhood, their dreams, their youth, their struggles, and their fading memory. These were the people who had lived in their land for generations; the land which belonged to them for thousands

of years, and the land from which they migrated seven times. The eighth was the last of the migrations, the one which they recalled with horror. It was a migration followed by deaths and tortures. They ended by leading a life of endless waiting. They faded away, slowly, into loneliness and neglect.

Sridar saw some men who felt defeated and vanquished by their condition. They had lost the ability to fight. In tents there were no curtains behind which husbands and wives could seek solace and comfort in each others' arms. There were no warm embraces, no passionate holding of hands, no throbbing of hearts. There were just empty gazes at the moths circling the bulbs at nights, and at the mosquitoes and insects teasing them. And, there were silences of despair.

Sridar toiled through the stories he wrote. Some stories recounted by the migrants had gaps. There were long spells when nothing happened. A civilisation ceased to exist; it dangled between nothingness and forgetfulness. Sridar did not know how to unknot the knots in many stories he wrote. The threads connecting the story of one man to the story of his father and mother and grandfather and grandmother simply broke in the middle.

No penance could get the memories back. Nothing could make the words flow from the parched mouths of the storytellers.



Sridar met Nagraj at a funeral gathering of a writer. Many migrant writers attended the funeral. Such funerals were an occasion for the writers of the community to meet and share views on the state of culture in exile. Sridar was introduced

to Nagraj by an acquaintance when the cremation was over. Nagraj worked as a part-time theatre actor in Delhi. Sridar walked with Nagraj to the place where he stayed in Jammu. Nagraj told Sridar that he was working on a play about a migrant family living in the camp. They stopped at a highway tea shop for tea and cigarettes.

Nagraj's parents had died in the early years of exile. His father could not bear the separation from the *Bhands* he had brought together. The family came from a village where militancy was at its peak during the early nineties. His father Dwarka Nath was a poet and writer, who worked in the animal husbandry department at Sumbal in Kashmir. He ran a repertoire of *Bhands*, traditional street performers. They did small satirical performances called *Pather*. Dwarka Nath helped each member of the *Bhand* to be an actor, acrobat and musician. He got the poor and the downtrodden of the village to join him and perform on certain occasions. These *Bhands* were sweepers, woodcutters, blacksmiths, potters, labourers and weavers, who were trained by Dwarka Nath. They were the real people; the beautiful people who were not afraid of anything. They knew how to make others laugh and think.

Nagraj spoke of the days when as a young boy his father used to take him to a street to watch a *Bhand Pather*.

'There was satire and humour in the performance. And everything was well-received by the people and the rulers,' Nagraj said.

'No one has heard much about these performances. They are forgotten now,' Sridar said.

'That is why I want to revive the *Pather*,' Nagraj said. 'It is my father's unfinished work. He gave up his life for these acts. I want to enact these street shows for those who have lost

their dreams and hopes, and for those whose voices have been suppressed in these years of turmoil.'

He promised that he would meet Sridar in Delhi.

The following day Sridar met a migrant who was from Sumbal, the village where Dwarka Nath and his troupe performed Bhand Pather. The migrant knew Dwarka Nath personally. Sridar asked him if he remembered some performances.

'Everyone in the village knew Dwarka Nath. He was a pious man. He did much for his Bhands. But finally, everything ended,' the man said.

The migrant narrated a sad tale of how the militants threatened Dwarka Nath if he did not leave Kashmir within the deadline set by them.

'What happened to the Bhands after he left?' Sridar asked.

'The Bhands were poor people. They attacked the shallowness of the rulers. Dwarka Nath's Bhand Pather did not spare anyone. The militants thought that certain scenes were against their philosophy. Their last performance was 'The Dance of Death.' Death was played by a sweeper, an old man who had spent most of his life sweeping the roads and spraying water on the pavements from a leather dispenser. In the end Death was engaged. Some days later Dwarka Nath left the house and migrated to Jammu along with his family. One of our neighbours told me that militants visited Dwarka Nath's house with a gun and threatened to kill his wife if he continued to stay there.'



Before beginning the last chapter of *The Book of Ancestors*, Sridar decided to go to Kashmir and visit his old house. He tried to

search for Pamposh and his family in the camp and the nearby localities where the migrants resided, but was told that they had left Jammu. No one had seen them leave. No one knew where they were. A clerk working at the Camp Commandant's office managed to locate the registration record of Pamposh's family. He was able to dig out their address in Kashmir. Sridar took the address with him. In his mind he imagined various possibilities – 'Did they go back to Kashmir despite the dangers lurking there? Did they disappear from the migrant camp, unable to bear the humiliation and ignominy of having to live in the miserable condition? Or did they manage to find a suitable room in the city to live in anonymity?'

Sridar did not make a concerted effort to search for Pamposh's family, fearing that he might not be able to bear the sight of his grandparents and the look in their eyes.

He was not sure if he would be recognised in his old neighbourhood in Srinagar. He had not forgotten the faces of his grandfather's friends. He hoped that they remembered his grandfather, and that they remembered him as a small boy perched on his grandfather's shoulders, with a colourful *tikwawuj* in his hand.

The bus from Jammu to Srinagar left at seven in the morning. Winter had set in. It was a cold January in 2005. Fifteen years had passed since the exodus of the Pandits from the Valley. The view from the window kept Sridar glued to the window seat. He could not take his eyes off the mountains as the bus meandered through the passes of the mountain range.

The bus stopped at many places on the highway to let the army convoys pass. Soldiers stood vigilant every fifty meters on both sides of the road. The soldiers guarding the Banihal tunnel stood firm and brave. Sridar remembered his childhood

days, when he and his friends used to wave at and salute the soldiers from the roadside. The soldiers used to smile and wave at them.

Sridar felt that the mountains looked at him mockingly.

He looked at the fields at Qazigund, where the bus stopped for a while so that the passengers could have some tea. The beauty of the place had disappeared. He remembered the scene at Qazigund years ago where the trucks carrying the Pandits had stopped for morning tea on a winter day.

A jawan stood, statue-like, with a gun on his shoulder, at the edge of the road. Sridar bought himself a cup of tea and walked towards the jawan. He introduced himself and started talking with him. The jawan said that he was from a small village in Madhya Pradesh.

'How long have you been posted here?' Sridar asked.

'Six months,' the jawan replied. He seemed happy that a stranger had started talking to him.

'Your family! Don't they fear for your safety in this place?'

'No, they don't watch television or read the papers that much.'

'What about you? Don't you feel unsafe? A bullet or a grenade can land from anywhere.'

'There is nothing to worry. I am used to it. Next year I will be transferred to some other place. My job is to stand with a gun and wait for the time to pass by and not worry about death.'

'Isn't it boring for you to keep standing for hours together in this turmoil-ridden place?'

'It is so peaceful here, near the mountain. Only in the city there are gun battles. My brother lost his life here some years

back. He was also in the army. Normally, nothing happens here. I sip tea and talk to the locals from the village. I am told that some years back they hated people from the armed forces. But they seem to like me. They send me some Kashmiri snacks to munch on when it gets very cold.'

'Do you have children?'

'I have two daughters and a son. They miss me. I yearn to be with them.'

Sridar bid him farewell.

'Sorry, I didn't get your name,' Sridar asked when he remembered that he had not asked the jawan his name.

'I am Ram Naik. It was nice talking to you sir,' the jawan said and returned to his position.

On 21 January 1990, the first batch of Pandits had fled their houses in horror towards Jammu. That day it did not snow in the city, while the Pandits evacuated their houses at dawn and boarded buses and trucks towards Jammu.

At Pampore Sridar looked at the saffron fields. He could not remember what month the farmers would start tilling the soil to sow saffron seeds. He wanted to look at the violet saffron flowers once again.

Decades ago, Sridar's great-grandmother Poshkuj had sung songs of spring and happiness with her friends in the saffron fields. Those were the same fields where once Poshkuj walked hand in hand with her husband and dreamt of a happy life.

The buses carried tourists to Srinagar. He saw Muslim boys wave at him. He felt numb as he reached the Tourist Reception Centre in Srinagar, the same place from where he had boarded the bus to Jammu many years back. The evening air bore a dreary stillness in it. His mind was blank, unable to see the change that had taken place. His thoughts wandered

back and forth the past and the present. Nothing seemed to have changed. The smell of the poplars and the chinars told him that this was home.

An auto rickshaw driver approached him and greeted him.

'Where would you like to go Panditji?' he asked.

It was a question Sridar expected. And, he had kept his answer ready for fifteen years.

'Home! Would you take me home? Khankah-i-Sokhta.'

'You must be settled in Jammu now? Are you coming home after many years?' the driver asked.

'Fifteen years.'

'This is your home after all. You belong here. We have lost a generation in these fifteen years. Look at the bridge here. Look at the houses. Everything is a wreck. Will Pandits never return now? Many have built houses in Jammu and are settled there now.'

Sridar did not know what to say. He had no words to describe his feelings.

'Am I returning home? Am I a tourist? What strange feeling is this?' he wondered.

As the auto rickshaw reached Nalle-e-Maer, Sridar instantly recognised the shops and the houses. The pharmacy, the bookstore, Noor Medical shop, the grocery, the butcher, and the kite maker were all there. Everything came alive. He recognised the desolate houses which once belonged to Pandits. The houses were deserted. There were no doors or windows left in the houses. He turned his gaze away from the sight of the houses. He could not bear to see the devastation. He thought he saw familiar faces. Men and women walked on the pavements

wearing pherans. Shopkeepers perched lazily in their shops, smoking the hookah and waiting for customers.

The walls of the houses and shops were full of old graffiti – 'Freedom for Kashmir.'

A broken hollowness hung on the faces of old people walking on the pavement and sitting on the shopfronts. The sky was sullen. Sridar looked at the snow-capped mountains for long, as though he were seeing a mountain for the first time in his life.

He got down from the auto rickshaw and walked towards Yarbal, his old neighbourhood.

He saw his old house from a distance. The tin roof was all rust brown. The wooden pillars on the top floor had turned dark. From a distance he saw the arched window of his father's room on the first floor. He cried silently, alone, amid frosty and desolate surroundings. Ravaged by nostalgia, he stood firm and bold. The dull grey sky reminded him of the fleeting nature of time and the transience of things. Some shards of memory flashed before him. Some recollections from a distant childhood were still wet in the ruins of his old house.

When he got closer to his house, the past seemed to unfold itself, layer by layer. Fear lurked in his heart, fear of facing part of his own self which he had left behind years ago. Fear of being confronted by signs which, perhaps, were yet to be erased! Those signs still existed.

His house faced the house where Tota Maecz once lived. To his amazement, a deserted wheelbarrow lay upside down near a poplar tree. He wondered if this was the same wheelbarrow from his childhood days.

Beside the tree, the lamp post of his childhood stood tall and frozen in time. It stood unravaged by all these years of

violence and bloodshed. It seemed to wait for the snowfall. Sridar remembered how, as a young boy, he used to hurl stones at the icicles that hung from the edges of the roofs.

He saw the initials of his grandfather's name still etched on the door of his old house. He stood petrified, frozen in the moment and its strangeness.

'My God! Is this a miracle?' he mumbled.

He knocked at the door. A middle-aged woman opened the door and greeted him when he introduced himself. The words he spoke were broken. The woman smiled a sad smile when he told her that he once lived in that house.

'Many years back, I lived in this house. My family and I left this house in 1990. May I please come inside and take a look?' he asked hesitantly.

The woman said that her husband was not home.

'Come inside my son!' she said. 'My husband earns his living by selling vegetables. He comes home late in the night. You can come in and see the house. There is no need to be afraid of anything. Your family lived here. I can see it in your eyes.'

There was a look of compassion and pity in her eyes.

Sridar saw the courtyard of his old house and walked on the verandah. Nothing had changed. He looked at the stained glass window of his room. He could not take the gaze away from the window. It was a dream-like moment. The smell that wafted from the windows was distinct. He thought it was the scent of camphor. In an instant, he realised that it was now a Muslim house. Yet, everything around the corners seemed the same. He felt like thanking them for not disturbing the harmony of things as he remembered.

'Have we kept your house in order?' the woman asked. She had a glint in her eyes.

In the living room, an old woman sat quietly. She held a cup of tea in her hand. The woman introduced Sridar to her mother-in-law.

'He is a Pandit who once lived in this house,' the woman said to her mother-in-law.

Sridar greeted the old woman.

'This was my home many years back. I grew up here,' he said.

The old woman smiled and said, 'This is still your home my son. May God bless you!'

A beautiful golden-haired girl got down the stairs and looked at the stranger. Her smile quavered. Sridar wanted to pocket that smile.

'She is my Noor,' the woman said.

Sridar took out a hundred rupee note and handed it over to the girl.

'No,' the girl's mother said.

'Please, let her accept it. It is for a chocolate for the little girl,' he insisted. The woman obliged him.

The woman complained that the previous occupants had not taken care of the house. It needed renovation, especially the walls on the third floor.

Sridar felt that the woman was proud and happy to welcome him and show him around the house. The woman felt joyous seeing Sridar remember all the details of the house.

He climbed the stairs and went to the third floor. He knew each step by heart. As he took the steps he touched the walls. The windows were as they had been fifteen years ago. From the window Sridar looked at the Eidgah where children flew kites all day long. The Tibetan settlement was still surrounded

by graceful poplars and some weeping willows. Smoke wafted from the chimneys.

The woman's elder daughter offered Sridar a cup of tea and cakes. She went on gazing at Sridar.

'Mother, is he a Muslim? How does he speak in Kashmiri like we do? Where has he come from?' the girl asked her mother.

'He is a Pandit who lived in this house long ago,' said her mother.

'He is like us all. He is having cakes and tea the way we have it. What is this? Who are Pandits, mother?' the girl asked.

Her mother smiled and didn't say anything.

'How do you feel in this house?' the woman asked Sridar.

Sridar still felt a sense of belonging to the house. He looked at the door of his room. The room now belonged to the girl. The woman opened the door for Sridar to enter and see the things around. He entered the room where he had spent his childhood, reading and writing and dreaming.

Familiar signs still glowed on the walls of his room. The stairs, the ceiling, the verandah and the courtyard were the same.

His name was still there on the door of his room. A painting of a tree hung on the wall. Every memory came to light. He looked across the room for his mahogany bookshelf. It was still there. The books had been plundered during the turmoil when the house was vacant. Sridar felt tempted to begin life anew from where he had left. He felt tempted to ask the woman for the painting that hung on the wall. He felt that she would happily give it over to him if he asked for it. He had painted the tree when he was a child.

He touched the walls of his room. It was a holy shrine. The window was shut. He remembered how he had argued

with his father years back not to replace the stained glass. He remembered how the golden rays of the rising sun entered the room through the half-shut stained glass window and dyed the wall of his room. As a child he used to hide beneath the quilt and imagine the colourful shapes all over him. He loved the different shapes of the light on the walls of his room.

After some time Sridar bid farewell to the family and to the house. He said 'goodbye' to the little girl and thanked her.

'I came to visit my old home,' he told the little girl with rosy cheeks. 'And I came to meet you!'

The girl smiled and pretended that she understood him. Sridar felt that she did not want him to leave.

He secretly called the house his *own*. The willow tree which his grandfather had planted in the courtyard was not there. They had felled the tree.

There were other rooms which he wanted to see. Something kept him from entering the rooms. From the courtyard he looked again at the window of his grandfather's room. It was the same window by which his grandfather had spent long winter days, sitting and smoking the hookah while watching the snowfall. He remembered how his grandfather used to shout from his room to ask him to buy tobacco for the hookah from Shambu Nath's shop.

Even after many years Sridar had not forgotten the smell of that tobacco. It remained with him forever.

The woman saw him off at the point where the narrow street ended. Years ago there had been no time for goodbyes, no peace to take a last look at his room and his treasure that enlivened his childhood, no time to caress the walls adorned with his favourite pictures. The neighbours had been asleep, when, in turbulent circumstances, he found himself stealthily

leaving the house; not knowing that this departure was to be forever.

Juma Saecz's house did not have either a name or a number. None of the houses in the locality in downtown Srinagar had any numbers. Numbers were not important. The narrow lane was nameless too. Sridar remembered that Juma Saecz's shop was just at the end of the street. An old man sat in the shop. The man was clean-shaven and wore a pheran and a *Karakuli* cap. He sat cross-legged, engrossed in stitching a piece of cloth on his sewing machine. Sridar came nearer and recognised him instantly. This was the old man who had been his grandfather's friend for years. He remembered them sitting at the shop, talking for hours together on winter days. Those days there was nothing much to do, except sit in the shop for long and watch the passersby and greet them. Some would stop by the shop and discuss politics and weather.

'Aadab! You may not recognise me,' Sridar said. 'I am the grandson of your old friend Mahanandju, who lived in the house just at the end of this street. Do you remember him? He left with his family in 1990.'

The old man looked at Sridar with tremendous agony in his eyes. For a minute he did not speak. Then, he smiled a smile that betrayed pain and sadness.

'How is he doing? My friend!' the old man asked. 'You have grown into a fine young man my son! You were a child when your grandfather used to accompany you on this street. Where is he these days? Is he happy and healthy?'

'He died some years ago,' Sridar said. 'He used to talk about you. I came to see our house and meet all the people who knew him. I have great memories of you, in particular.'

The old tailor looked at the picture of Mecca on his wall. He fell silent for some moments and mumbled a prayer.

'May God forgive my sins for not even grieving my old friend's demise! He would have died a happy man in his own house. My son, I offer you my blessings for informing me of my old friend.'

'I want you to know that he died thinking of his friends and the old times spent here. In his last days he wore the shirt that was sewn by you. Do you remember that you tailored all his shirts?' Sridar said.

'All his shirts, his pherans and the trousers too! I used to make dresses for all the Pandits living in this locality. They trusted only my measurements. My hand was steady then. It is no longer that steady now. Sometimes, my fingers tremble. Those days no one could compare with me in needlework. Now old age and medicines keep me good company. But these days no one wants to stitch their clothes at my shop.'

Juma Saecz's shop was still as lonely as it used to be years ago. A broom in a corner, some stitched shirts and pherans on hangers, a hookah and a kangri.

'Familiar belongings!' Sridar thought.

'I must take leave now. It was great seeing you after all these years. My grandfather must be smiling somewhere!' Sridar said.

'May God bless you my son! Thank you for coming to see me. Pardon me, but I don't remember my last meeting with your grandfather. I waited for him, and then got to know that he had left this Kashmir.'

Tears came to his eyes as he said these words. Dejected at his own helplessness, he got back to sewing a cap.

The cold got bitter as Sridar walked past Qadir Goor's shop. A young man sat at the place where Qadir Goor once sat. Behind the shop was the cowshed where every morning people assembled with their utensils to buy fresh warm milk and curd. The man was talking to someone. Sridar hesitated to introduce himself. He stopped near the shop as though he wanted to purchase milk. Years ago, he would hold forth his palm for Qadir Goor to place a spoonful of creamy curd on it.

Sridar walked further towards the end of the street to Gota's shop where he made pinwheels for the children of the locality. The street ended and forked to meet two wide streets that led to the bridge over the river Jhelum. Gota's shop was closed. It was getting dark. In winters, shops closed early in the evenings. A barber's shop adjacent to Gota's shop was open. Two men sat in chairs listening to the radio. Sridar climbed the steps to the barber's shop and asked about his grandfather's old friend who made exquisite pinwheels.

'Janab! Would you like a shave or a haircut?' the man on the chair asked Sridar as he saw him approach the shop.

'May I please borrow a matchbox? Just want to light my cigarette. It is a cold evening.'

The man handed over a matchbox to Sridar and asked him if he had lost his way.

'Was the shop adjacent to yours open today? I am here after many years. A man used to make pinwheels in this shop. Have you seen him lately?' Sridar asked the man. He held a matchbox in his hands and lit the cigarette in the cold.

'You mean the shop with a big lock on? It has remained shut for years now. It belonged to my uncle. How do you know him?'

'He was my grandfather's friend,' Sridar said. 'We lived here in a house at the end of the street toward Yarbhal. As a boy, I played with the colourful pinwheels your uncle made for me. My grandfather bought one for me every day of his life when we lived here. I am here after many years. I don't remember much of my childhood. The pinwheels are the only things I can never forget. I long for them even now.'

The man listened patiently to Sridar.

'My uncle collapsed and died while chopping a block of wood last winter. He had stopped making pinwheels long back owing to a tremor in his hands. Moreover, there was no demand for them. The children no longer found them attractive and useful. No one bought them even for five paise. The times have changed brother,' the man said.

'I am sorry to hear this,' Sridar said.

'You must come to our home. It is just towards the back of the shop. Stay for dinner. I am like your brother,' the man said.

'Some other day! Today I would like to meet everyone here, whom I remember from my childhood days.'

The man could not imagine how badly Sridar wanted to meet Gota, the pinwheel man, to thank him for all those lovely things which decorated his childhood. He desired to see the colourful pinwheels once again, and to hold one in his hand and run. He felt cheated by time and fate. He felt sad that they were no more there in his life and was tormented to hear that the man who made them had died.

Sridar retraced his steps towards his old house. He wanted these moments to last forever. Ali's house was a few narrow streets away. He remembered visiting Ali's house as a child. The house looked different from what he had seen

of it last. The windows had been replaced. The outer walls of the house were painted and the gate was new. He knocked at the door.

'Who is it?'

'This is Sridar from Delhi.'

A young boy opened the door and let him in. Sridar asked for Ali. Through the window of the kitchen, Ali's wife saw Sridar enter. She shouted for Ali. Ali came down from the stairs and fixed his gaze at Sridar for a few moments. When he recognised Sridar, he held his arms and gave him a hug. Sridar noticed that Ali was crying. He sat on a carpet and looked at Ali wipe tears from his eyes. He did not know what to say. He fell silent. Ali's wife reacted as though her own son had returned from an unknown place. She sat beside Sridar and enquired about his mother and father.

'They are all fine and remember you fondly,' Sridar said.

Ali's wife repeatedly asked Sridar the same question.

'How are your mother and father? Are they fine and happy?'

Sridar reassured them that his family was fine. They had learnt about Mahanandju's death some time back.

Ali insisted that Sridar spend the night with them. Sridar lied to them that his friend waited for him at the hotel. He knew that nothing else would sound convincing. He told them that he had been inside his old house.

Sridar wanted to know about others he remembered. He wanted to know what had become of Tota Maecz, who lived across the lane opposite their house. He had not spotted her anywhere near her house. And he wanted to know what had happened to her old father and her sister. He wanted to know about Gani.

'Would Nusrat be as beautiful as she was when they left? Would her cheeks be as rosy and as lustrous? Would her lips be the cherries of summer?' he wondered.

Sridar mustered courage and asked Ali about Tota and Nusrat.

'Where is Tota? Is her father, the ironsmith, fine?' Sridar asked. He held his breath and waited for Ali to speak of them.

Somehow, Sridar was prepared for an answer he did not wish to hear.

'Tota died eight years ago. She was hit by a stray bullet during a crossfire that raged in our street. It was evening and Tota was waiting for someone to take her home. A bullet hit her and she bled to death on this very street. Her father could not bear this loss. One winter it snowed very heavily for days. Everyone prayed for the sun to come out. The roof of Gulakhar's house collapsed. It is no more than a hovel now. Two years ago his younger daughter got married to a carpenter from a neighbouring locality. She never returned to her old house after her marriage. Gulakhar sold the dilapidated house to some family from across the river.'

Sridar's mind went blank.

'And Gani and Shaha?' he asked Ali.

'Many died from our locality and the neighbouring locality. Gani's wife Shaha died some years back of some grave illness. Gani too died shortly thereafter. His brother bought a house in a different locality and shifted from here. There is no one to cut the wild nettles that crawl over the tombstones now,' Ali lamented.

Sridar felt sad.

'After all these years nothing seems to have changed here in our locality yet, much is lost,' he said.

'The situation is better now. Aren't you going to visit the Kheer Bhawani?' Ali asked.

'This is my pilgrimage; the visit to my house. I hope I can get my grandmother here someday. She would be happy to visit the shrine at Reshippeer. I know she still dreams of offering a niyaz there.'

'Bring her here! She can stay with us,' Ali's wife said.

Ali presented Sridar an old copy of *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*. He slipped a fifty-rupee note into the book.

'I am no longer a kid uncle,' Sridar said and smiled.

'Get yourself some candy my son,' Ali said. 'The book is for you to read and remember me.'

Sridar finished his cup of kehva and bid Ali and his wife farewell.

In the grey darkness he cast one last look at the house where Tota, the mad girl, lived with her poor father and beautiful sister Nusrat. He took the last turn in the street leading to the graveyard. On the wall of the graveyard he read – 'Free Kashmir. I love you. From Nazir to Shabnam!' A smile flickered on his lips. Years back, lovers from the nearby locality used to hide there to spend some moments in quietude. The graveyard still promised the same quietude. The yellow light from the lamp post faded at the ruins of an old gate.

Sridar didn't want to leave the locality. He wanted to stand in front of his house and look at it for long. The house was swathed in creepers. In the coming spring the creepers would grow new leaves and adorn the walls of the house. He wished to reach out from the window of his room to touch the creepers! How he wished to hold forth his hand and cup the milky snowflakes in his palm!

The temple across the street was dilapidated, ravaged and abandoned. What lurked inside were echoes of time past and heart-rending and devastating loneliness! A portion of the wall surrounding the temple had caved in due to years of neglect. Sridar remembered the chime of the temple-bell and the sound of the conch. Now, all sounds were buried in the forsaken corners. From the courtyard of the temple, he looked at the calm waters of the Jhelum flow quietly. The flowing waters took with them frozen dreams of a lost generation and some broken reflections of Sridar's childhood. He saw the old bridge, the Hari Parbat, and the doongas on the banks of Jhelum.

The muezzin's call was heard: 'Allah O Akbar! Allah O Akbar!'

Sridar made up his mind to stay in Kashmir for some more days, as long as his heart cried for his home and motherland, Maej Kashir. A last minibus took him to Lal Chowk and dropped him near the Clock Tower, from where he walked to Lambert Lane near the Bund.

He chose to stay at a hotel on the Bund. It seemed that it would snow the next day.

Sridar spent hours sitting by the window of the hotel room, looking at the river. The lights from the sky shimmered intermittently on the calm waters of the river. The night was quiet. Sridar fell into a trance thinking of the time when gun battles raged in the neighbourhood.

The sounds still echoed in his memory – 'Allah O Akbar; tyrants, leave this land; we want freedom, we want freedom!'



In the morning Sridar read in the local newspaper about a play being staged in a school compound in downtown Srinagar. It was a play written and directed by Faud, his classmate in school. The newspaper report contained the phone numbers of the organisers. Sridar called them to see if he could meet Faud and also watch the play. It was late in the afternoon when Faud gave a phone call to Sridar. He asked him to watch the play and spend the evening with him.

The play *He Will Come* was about two young Kashmiri Muslim boys, who wait for their friend to return after having bunked school for many days. The boy never returns and his friends continue to wait. It was a scintillating performance by two boys of a school who played the characters.

Nagraj was also in Srinagar to watch the play. When the play ended Sridar met Faud and Nagraj at a cafe in the school compound. Sridar congratulated Faud for the brilliant play.

Faud had left Kashmir six years ago to pursue media studies in the USA. He had returned to complete a project as part of his thesis.

Sridar asked Faud about the other Muslim classmates who studied with him in school.

'Where are Firdaus and Zahoor who were the best players in our school cricket team? And Asif who used to help us cheat in examinations?' Sridar asked.

'You remember everyone!' Faud remarked excitedly. 'Firdaus became a militant and was killed ten years back. They say that he fought bravely till his last breath. A volley of bullets fired by the army turned his chest into a sieve. Zahoor completed his MBBS from Russia and is a doctor now, somewhere in that part of the world. Asif, who always used to score the highest

marks in our class, got married and now lives in Bombay. I have lost touch with my other Pandit friends.'

Faud asked Sridar about the Pandit classmates. They reminisced about the school days. Nagraj introduced Gowhar to Sridar.

'Meet Gowhar, an old friend and classmate of mine. We met today after ages,' Nagraj said while introducing his friend.

'It is a reunion of sorts and we must celebrate,' Faud said. They all laughed.

Gowhar had given up his job as a reporter for a television news channel and started *Free Kashmir*, an English language daily. Sridar had read some of his articles in the paper. Gowhar had married the daughter of a cleric from Pakistan.

'How is the movement going on?' Nagraj asked Gowhar jokingly. 'From Pakistan to Azadi to the Peace Process! The Muslim leaders and the influential people in the Valley seem to have betrayed their own cause by giving in to greed.'

Gowhar laughed.

'What freedom are you talking about?' Gowhar asked mockingly. 'We will never be free. Who wants it anyway? We love to be in the shackles of the dream of freedom. We complain of misery and subjugation.'

'I dream freedom. I am the persecuted and the betrayed . . .'
Nagraj said. 'This is the voice of the Kashmiri Muslim now.'

'Nagraj, freedom is a prostitute who lures us with her false charms. Let her be at a distance. We need to be like this for some more years,' Gowhar said.

'What do you mean?' Nagraj asked.

'You Pandits did a wise thing by leaving Kashmir. At least, you saved yourself from dying many deaths every day. Kashmir is a place where human values never mean anything. Don't

you watch television? People are hoodwinked into believing lies. We can't admit the truth to ourselves.'

There was an awkward silence for some moments. Gowhar looked at Sridar and thought that he was trying to say something.

'I often joke with my friends that I am fifteen years younger than my age, because the last fifteen years are a waste,' Gowhar said. 'All these futile and fruitless years! Everything lost! What atrophy? One wishes for these years to get erased from one's memory. And the Pandits! How do they feel living outside their homeland?'

'We bred hope all these years. An entire generation withered! You are not the only ones to have lost and suffered,' Nagraj said.

'Now, you demand your own homeland. But this is your homeland,' Gowhar said.

'We long for our homeland, but no one will ever return,' Nagraj said.

'Do you feel betrayed by the Muslims? Do you think we are to blame for what happened to the Pandits?' Gowhar asked.

Nagraj paused for a moment, and then decided to say something which was difficult for him to say.

'I don't know. There can't be any clear answer,' he said. 'Maybe, finding answers is not what I seek.'

He knew that he didn't have any answers. He had never analysed the happenings and the turn of events in his mind. He had no inclination to judge and blame anyone.

'Well! I am on the side of those who can't speak and haven't spoken for ages,' Sridar said breaking his silence.

'When I visited Pakistan and met the Muslims there, I shuddered,' Gowhar said. 'They are not like us. Our beliefs

and the way of life are different from theirs. I saw horror when I met a family from Azad Kashmir. I almost got killed when I narrated a joke. I never knew humour could be taken so seriously.'

Nagraj sensed that it was pointless to go on talking like this. He told Faud and Gowhar that he wanted to introduce Bhand Pather to other cities in the country.

'We can tell the real stories to the people of this country,' he said referring to his new script.

A little later they decided to drive to the Dachigam Sanctuary. Nagraj said that he wanted to have some *kebabs*.

They sat in Gowhar's car and drove past the Dal Lake. Gowhar talked about the perils of working as a journalist in the city and shared an anecdote with everyone. It was about an incident that had occurred while he was a reporter for a news channel.

'I was reporting an incident that had taken place in Pulwama,' Gowhar said. 'A woman had been raped and the blame game was on. The mornings started with the protestors pelting stones at the security forces. Students bunked school to join the protestors. The security forces fired at the crowd. A friend of mine was hit by a bullet fired by a jawan. He collapsed on the ground and wriggled in pain. The bullet was in his thigh. Blood gushed forth from the wound, like a fountain. I flung my camera over my shoulder and carried him to the nearest minivan. Two young boys, who watched us from a shop nearby, helped me take him to the hospital. I waited outside the Emergency Ward. Meanwhile, I got a call from my office asking me to send a report and the pictures by email. I had to make a choice. Leave my friend alone and attend to my job or risk losing my job. I wondered what to do. I made a

call to my office and explained the situation. They didn't say anything, but expected me to send the pictures immediately. I ignored their calls and spent the rest of the day waiting for my friend to come out of the Emergency Ward. I just wanted to 'see him come out alive.'

They drove through Boulevard and reached Dachigam. A roadside hawker roasted kebabs on a grill. Gowhar ordered mutton kebabs and lavasas for everyone.

'Why are you quiet Sridar?' Faud asked.

'I am enjoying the view of the mountains after so many years. I wish I had brought my camera along,' Sridar replied. He narrated the events of the previous day, the details of his homecoming.

'I know how you must feel to be home after so many years,' Faud said.

Sridar smiled.

'I am a tourist now,' he said. 'A migrant who returned to his home as a tourist!'

'So am I,' Faud said. 'Even I am a migrant, having left Kashmir to study in the USA. For me it is also a homecoming.'

Sridar didn't say anything. There was nothing to say at all.

Faud continued, 'Another Pandit friend of mine, who lives in Delhi, visited his house in Kukarnag after eleven years and was shocked to see a shopping complex constructed at the place where once his house existed.'

'We all have tragic stories to tell!' Nagraj said.

'Things are not what they seem. There is depravity everywhere,' Gowhar rued. He had gone through the worst times during his reporting days. 'Corruption is an obsession now. The Indian forces at the border and the militant leaders

are hand in glove. Militants bring truck loads of fake currency. The forces kill some militants and let others go. Then they stage a press conference and say that they have captured the militants along with the guns and explosives. The public is relieved. The government smiles. We, in the media, get stories. And the money passes through many hands. This is the business of maintaining peace in Kashmir.'

Sridar listened patiently. 'There will always be many points of view. Not one of them is true,' Nagraj said.

'Kashmiris now express themselves by displaying their riches. Nothing else matters to the community,' Gowhar said. 'I wish we could bring back the old days.'

'There is no hope Gowhar. We are the last of our generation to have lived in Kashmir with Kashmiri Muslims as our friends and neighbours.'

'Real stories will never die,' Gowhar said. 'My maternal uncle lost his mental balance after his son disappeared from his home. Someone told him that his son might have been killed while crossing the border. He waited for his son's return. He became suicidal. Our relatives took him to a Pandit psychiatrist, who, after migration, practised at a clinic in Delhi. We are thankful to the doctor for bringing my uncle back to life. He had lost the will to live. Now he has learnt to smile again.'

'We should all get together and make a film based on all the stories we lived through,' Faud said excitedly.

Gowhar drove everyone back to city. He dropped Nagraj and Sridar at Dal Gate. Faud said 'goodbye' to Sridar and made him promise that he would visit Kashmir every year in holidays.

'Are you doing any plays?' Sridar asked Nagraj. 'I heard that you are planning to work with the Bhands on a new performance.'

'You must come and watch my play, *The Burnt Day*, in Jammu. It is about a migrant, who takes his old and dying mother to their old house in Kashmir. The son and mother undertake the pilgrimage after ten years in exile. They visit the mausoleum of a saint in their ancestral village. I am sure people will like the way the play ends,' Nagraj said.

'There must be a part of you in your plays?' Sridar asked.

'I dream of my father and mother quite often these days,' Nagraj said. Nagraj's father and mother had died in exile. He narrated his father's bitter experience and his own plight.

'My father felt guilt-ridden and blamed himself for deserting the members of his troupe, the Bhands, whom he loved,' Nagraj lamented. 'When we were in our house in Sumbal, the militants killed one person who performed for the troupe. He was a dancer. My father was told by the neighbours that it was his turn the day after. So, we left for Jammu the next morning. We left everything behind; the house, the belongings, everything! After our migration from Kashmir, I saw my father die every day. For days he did not speak at all and refused to accept the reality. I was a young boy at that time. My mother told me that my father bore a sense of guilt in his heart. The fact that he did not even meet his troupe before leaving the house tore his conscience to shreds. He thought that he had betrayed them and could not live with this sense of betrayal for long. Every day he would go for long walks. And one day, he did not return from his walk. A stroke had killed him. Soon after my father's death, my mother fell ill and died too. I decided to do something which my father would have liked me to do. Every morning I woke up to depression. I did not care about education. A degree meant nothing to me. And here I am today,

trying to imagine how my father felt when he performed with his troupe.'

'I feel that the situation in Kashmir has changed during these fifteen years. It is peaceful now,' Sridar said.

'This is not peace Sridar. This is only a semblance of normalcy and peace . . . common people feel betrayed. They are tired of the violence, the bloodshed and the deaths of their children. Their voices stand suppressed. People want to carry on doing the small things that give them joy. Freedom is an illusion. It eludes them. The rich and the powerful have cheated the poor and the downtrodden. Exhaustion has engulfed the innocent. The rich and the influential are making money while the poor are still chasing a distant dream.'

A grey cloud hung at the edge of the leaden sky. The cloud slid behind a mountain range hastily. Dusk fell over the Zabarwan. Sridar decided to walk from Dal Gate to his hotel. On his way to the hotel, he remembered how he used to cycle from his house to Dal Gate every Sunday morning in summers. He wished that the dusk could stay longer.



Next day Sridar set out for Varmul. He carried with him the address of the place where Pamposh's family lived many years back. The bus journey from Srinagar to Varmul took two hours. Varmul had been the hub of militancy. Many terrorists had been captured by the army there. Many languished in various jails. Many had been shot dead. The local dailies were full of such accounts of deaths and disappearances. People blamed the military and the security forces for the disappearances and the gruesome deaths of many youths.

It was a cold morning. White clouds floated aimlessly in the grey sky. Sridar boarded the bus at Votamol to Varmul.

As the bus sped past the poplar trees, Sridar felt the wintry chill kiss his cheeks. The chill sung a lullaby in his ears. He was reminded of familiar voices, voices of his grandmother singing folk songs during a marriage, voices of the devotees reciting prayers while climbing the stairs of a temple.

The separatists had given a call for hartal next day in Kashmir. There were posters announcing the hartal all across the Varmul town. From the bus stop at Varmul, Sridar walked to the main market where he asked the people the way to Pamposh's house. A man guided him towards a cluster of deserted Pandit houses. Some youths, who leaned against a wall, looked at Sridar suspiciously. They recognised him as a Pandit. No Pandit had stepped foot in this village for years. His presence stirred conversations among the youths, who idled near the shops.

It took him half an hour to reach the house. When he reached the place, he saw three deserted Pandit houses. Sridar looked at the address written on the sheet of paper.

There was no one around. He waited and explored the courtyard. The houses seemed to be falling apart. 'A few more years and then, they would cave in,' he thought. The windows gaped into a frozen nothingness, a horror. The porch leading to the corridor of the house was a wreck.

As Sridar walked around the three deserted houses, he saw snow all around. At a distance, children danced and some people hugged one another. He looked upwards towards the sky.

'This is turning out to be a pilgrimage,' he thought. He felt happy.

As he looked at the piece of land surrounding the houses, he saw a leafless tree. He touched the trunk of the tree and wondered what tree that was. In winters all trees looked the same. An old man with a stoop emerged from nowhere and walked towards him. His hands held a kangri close to his chest. His cheeks swallowed a mischievous smile, as he mistook the stranger for someone else, someone who was familiar to him.

'Are you the Pandit boy who once lived in this house?' he asked. 'You look familiar.'

Sridar was not surprised. He thought the old man mistook him for Pamposh.

'No, I am a friend of the boy who was born here and spent his childhood in this house,' Sridar said as he touched the tree. 'He lives somewhere else now. I came to see his old house.'

The old man had a fond look in his eyes. He touched the trunk of the tree and caressed it.

'This is a cherry tree my boy,' the old man said looking wistfully at the tree. 'Isn't it splendid, even when it is leafless? It belonged to the Pandits who lived here years ago. After they left, there was no one around to nurture the tree. I guess it grew old over all these years. Last year, I saw some cherry blossoms for the first time after many years. This year too, I am hopeful! You should come here and see the blossoms for yourself in spring when the snow melts. Each one will make your heart dance and sing.'

The cherry tree stood pitifully naked and lonesome. Sridar thought of Pamposh, his old friend from the migrant camp. The tree was his, as was the land in which its roots lay submerged. Sridar imagined how it must be in spring.

'I will come back in spring to see the garden in full bloom. I will get my friend along, the one who spent his childhood in this house,' Sridar said to the old man.

'I know the Pandits will return to their homes soon,' the old man said. He smiled, trudged forward along the narrow path leading to the fields and disappeared.

Sridar took the afternoon bus back to Srinagar. From the window he saw the road covered in a blanket of mushy snow. The bus drove past the leafless willows. He tried to listen to the sound of the snowfall. He had listened to the sound a million times. The mountains disappeared behind a veil of thick mist and a flurry of a million snowflakes. Alongside the road, a brook raced past the countryside.

It was a remorselessly cold January many years back. Sridar tried to understand his own feelings about the magical homecoming. There was no home now. Yet, some familiar traces existed! The bus driver played a folk song sung by Kashmiri girls on weddings.

Sridar's thoughts hovered around the stories in his book. He had realised that he had nothing to leave behind in the world except stories.

Later, he felt relieved that he had not requested the woman in his old house for the painting that hung on the wall of the room.

'It is safer with them in the house than it is with me,' he thought smugly. 'If it has survived in my old room for fifteen years, it can very well last a lifetime there. Some things are not meant to be uprooted.'

From the window, the lake looked wretchedly desolate and quiet. A thin layer of snowy mist stuck to the windowpane of

the speeding bus. It was getting dark. The moon hid behind the silken veil of the dancing snowflakes.

Sridar yearned to stand by the window of his old house, one last time, and reach for some old memories. He was tired of dreaming, of running after stolen moments, of pretending to hide behind a veil of endless days and nights, of mocking at himself and the world. A lucid darkness engulfed his heart.

His thoughts were adrift with the memory of the birch parchments pasted on the walls of his room and the cracked walls in the rented room at the camp. He tried to recollect the smell of the birches and the moist vapours in the camp. The moments he had lived in all the places were unforgettable. He turned his gaze elsewhere. A song that played in the bus ravenously drowned his thoughts and distracted him from thinking about the last passages he was to write for his book.

The next day he was to return to Jammu.

Tired and cold from the day's proceedings, Sridar leaned his head on the windowpane. Soon he dreamed a dream.

Yellow sunshine cascaded from the evening sun and fell over his old house. The long arms of the creepers embraced the house. The young golden-haired girl ran towards the window and opened it. As she waited patiently for the snowfall, she held her hands towards the sky to touch the snow. In the courtyard her father covered the roots of a felled willow tree with soil.

Winter crouched lazily in the dark shadow of the wild nettles in the forsaken graveyard.



Epilogue



Sridar took off his glasses and wiped the dust from the lenses. He adjusted the glasses on his nose and cleared his throat. The heat in the auditorium was insufferable. The people, seated languidly in the chairs, looked at the clock on the wall and wiped the sweat from their faces. The organisers walked back and forth on the stage, busy with making the last minute arrangements. A gentleman spoke feebly in the microphone to test it. The first few rows of chairs were reserved for the chief guest and other dignitaries.

Sridar sat in a chair and held his book in his hands.

'The function was supposed to start at six-thirty. It must be well past seven. I have to board the last bus home,' a gentleman said. He looked at the clock and fretted.

Two gentlemen waited at the main gate of the auditorium to check on the guests. A banner nailed to the wall of the auditorium read: *The Book of Ancestors*.

The migrant community had organised the function to commemorate the Martyrs' day, the day on which they remembered the first Pandit who was killed in Kashmir.

The day was hot and humid. People prayed for the rain to bring some respite.

Sridar greeted a gentleman sitting beside him, an old acquaintance from the camp college days.

'Do you realise that our generation belongs to the last Pandit generation with roots in Kashmir, and to have lived in our houses there,' the gentleman lamented.

'You are right,' Sridar replied.

'All of us sold our properties in Kashmir and severed our last ties with our own homeland,' the gentleman scoffed. 'Our children do not speak in Kashmiri now. The government does not care for us any longer. We are voiceless!'

Sridar nodded and turned to his wife. She waited impatiently for the function to commence.

'I fear this normal life. I dread this happy normalcy. I fear the silence. Where have our dreams fled?' the gentleman continued to rant. 'We gave up hope for the homeland. Our leaders chased elusive dreams. Ours was a short-lived cause. Now, we have no cause, no longing and no hope. We are free finally. A homeless lunatic at the shrine of Goddess Zala in Kashmir had predicted that we would betray ourselves, our children, our ancestors. Our dreams are now in shreds, behind a fading recollection of our forgotten past.'

He waited for Sridar's response. Sridar was inattentive.

'We and our rituals!' the gentleman sighed.

Sridar smiled and remembered the story of his great-grandmother's encounter with a lion one wintry night long ago and how she had slapped the beast amid the pear trees

in their orchard. He visualised the scene in his mind, over and over again.

Clearing his throat he decided to contribute to the gentleman's monologue. 'Well, I . . .'

The function started an hour late with the announcement of the organiser that the chief guest had regretted his inability to come that day. Someone gave a long lecture even while most of the seats were empty. He talked about Sridar's book.

The Book of Ancestors was released to a small gathering. Sridar read some passages from the book:

'What will you do with my things after I am gone?' my grandfather asked me. The smile on his face was that of an innocent child. I realised how difficult the question was for me. I wondered how difficult it must have been for him to ask me. Yet, I chose to remain silent and avoided an answer. I did not know the truth. Something kept me from exploring my answers. I shuddered at my own ignorance of my fears and uncertainties. I looked around. The room was full of family possessions. Books, old letters, clothes, pictures encaged in photo frames, glasses, shoes, wooden boxes and tin trunks, mute decorations on the shelves, and a dozen other nameless things littered the room. A morbid thought entered my mind and an image flashed before my eyes; that of my grandfather's last rites and the distribution of his personal belongings to the wandering mendicants.

Someone said, 'The rituals have to be observed here itself.'

'No,' I protested. 'Not for the things he possessed and loved. I know that, at times, he loved his possessions more than his own family. Everyone has such moments. We treasure small things and talk to them when we are sad and fearful. We live in our treasures.'

My grandfather smiled and a voice echoed in my ears, 'Don't give away my things after I am gone. Hide them from the world, for

they trade in things too precious to be either sold or bought. Dump my things somewhere in a corner at the attic of your house, even if you may not have time to dust them or look at them. Preserve these belongings for your children and grandchildren. Tell them, if you can, the stories about how I came to acquire these things.'

For the first time, I looked at the things around us differently; my grandfather's things and my own belongings. And these small possessions began to reveal themselves to me in a mysterious hue; all disguises seemed to lift. I surveyed my grandfather's room; the window where he sat for years, every evening, after returning from a hard day's work; the entry of the first rays of the sun into his room; the view of the solitary willow in the courtyard, and the perfectly symmetrical arrangement of his shoes and sandals in the shoe rack. I thought about my grandfather's coming and going from the same old corridor; the compassionate farewell of the youthful Habib leaving the house, certain of returning again the next day.

What did I want to do with my grandfather's possessions? Discard them, keep them in a trunk for unknown posterity, dust them once a year and forget them afterwards!

'What will you do with my things after I am gone?' The question echoed constantly in my mind. Would I ever be able to ask this question to my own child?

My search began. Grandmother was sitting idle, watching a programme on the television, pretending to enjoy it. Her gaze was deceptively fixed on the television. She had gotten used to waiting happily for nothing to happen. This waiting was no longer unbearable. As for me, I could not wait any longer. Hesitantly, I started a forgotten conversation.

'Grandma, do you remember telling me the story of your father's marriage to his fourth wife long ago?'

Her eyes shone, and she turned towards me. She readied herself to narrate the story all over again, with the same gusto and passion with which she had narrated it on previous occasions.

'His name was Shavji and he was very adventurous . . .'

A strange silence fell in the auditorium. A gentleman offered a vote of thanks to the audience.

It had started raining outside. The parking lot was empty.

Sridar stepped out of the auditorium, holding the hand of his wife and of his two-year-old daughter, and walked towards the bus stop.

Far away behind the distant mountains, slept the town he would never forget for the rest of his life.

Glossary



Gada Bhata	Kashmiri Pandit festival
Pheran	Long and commodious woollen apron worn by Kashmiris in winter
Wanwun	Traditional chorus sung by women on weddings
Kangri	Portable firepot consisting of an earthenware bowl set in a wickerwork case
Chinar	Maple-like tree native to Kashmir
Lavasa	Traditional Kashmiri tandoori roti
Doonga	Houseboat
Gabba	Hand woven woollen rug
Haakh	Commonly eaten green leafy vegetable in Kashmir
Shireen	Traditional Kashmiri candy
Monjhaakh	Commonly eaten vegetable in Kashmir
Tanzeem	Organisation devoted to a particular cause
Niyaz	Special offering at a shrine

Yamberzal	Kashmiri name for the flower 'Narcissus'
Shikara	A wooden boat
Nadroo	Lotus root
Gur gur tea	Traditional Ladakhi tea
Mokh mokh	Traditional Ladakhi dish
Kehva	Traditional Kashmiri tea
Roganjosh	Mutton dish
Dumaloo	Smoked potato

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G.M. College of Education
Raipur, Chatalab
Jammu

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Gandhi Memorial College Of Education Bantalab Jammu

Kashmir (1990): The vortex of armed insurgency and political turmoil. Protests, military crackdowns, deaths and devastation. Suspicion, mistrust and betrayal divide the Muslims and the Pandits. Exodus of hundreds of thousands of Pandits from their homeland is un mourned by the world.

In the verdant and picturesque Valley of Kashmir, Pandits are fleeing their houses in the wake of militancy. Sridar, a Kashmiri Pandit boy, leaves his ancestral home and his childhood behind when one winter night his family decides to leave Kashmir. The family flees reluctantly, and is forced to live in exile, battling deprivation, alienation and dementia. In alien surroundings, Sridar begins to find solace in his writings that speak of the agony of separation. The memory of grief-stricken faces of the exiles in the migrant camps is to remain with him forever.

Years later, Sridar's odyssey brings him back to the migrant camps and to his ancestral house in Kashmir, in search of stories that are on the verge of being forgotten by a generation; stories about identity and ancestry. He is tormented to see an entire generation of Kashmiri Pandits shattered and torn apart. Haunted by his past, he hopes to find answers to the questions that define him.



Siddhartha Gigoo was born in Srinagar, Kashmir, in 1974. He left Kashmir in 1990 due to the political turmoil and militancy. He studied English Literature at Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. Currently, he works for Tata Consultancy Services and lives with his wife and daughter in New Delhi. *The Garden of Solitude* is his debut novel. He has also written two poetry books, *Fall and Other Poems* (1994) and *Reflections* (1995).

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